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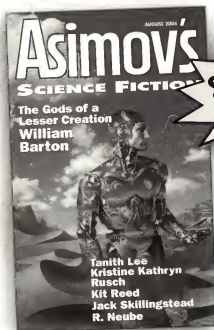
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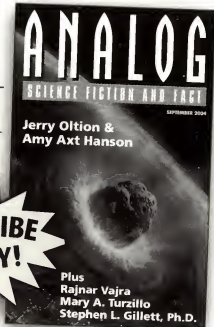
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SEPTEMBER 2005

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## GENERATIONS

As we all know, enthusiasms and skills are often passed from one generation to the next. The expert weaver passes on the craft to the apprentice, anglers pass the hobby on to their children, and the parent may pass on the joy of reading to the child. In science fiction, authors have the opportunity to learn from the masters of the past. You, too, may have been introduced to the joys of science fiction through the works of the field's masters. Your first book or story recommendations may have come from your own moms and dads.

I first encountered SFWA's newest Grand Master, Anne McCaffrey, in my teens when I was spellbound by a reprint of her 1968 Hugo-award-winning "Weyr Search." *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* describes Ms. McCaffrey's as a "writer of romantic, heightened tales of adventure explicitly designed to appeal—and make good sense to—a predominantly female adolescent audience." True perhaps, but I know that Anne's fiction was brought to my attention by my father. He was as enthralled by that story, and by her 1968 Nebula-award-winning "Dragon Rider," as I was. I next encountered, and was deeply moved, by *The Ship Who Sang*. It was my delight, years later, to reprint "The Ship Who Mourned" in one of my own anthologies, and, two years ago, I introduced my ten-year-old to *Dragonquest* and watched her zip through that novel and *The White Dragon*. Now she and her friends avidly trade and reread books like *Dragonsong* and *Dragonsinger*.

While rows of Anne's books can be found in bookstores and libraries, meeting her has been a little more difficult. Anne moved to Ireland long before I became active in the SF field. Although our paths have crossed briefly at a few conventions, and I had had the pleasure of meeting her son, the author Todd McCaffrey, I'm not sure if I'd ever had a chance to speak to Anne until this year's Nebula Awards Ceremony. At a cocktail party beforehand, I congratulated her on the imminent presentation of her Grand Master award and thanked her for her remarkable fiction. I was moved when she showed me a beautiful dragon necklace that had been made for her to mark the occasion by Andre Norton—a wonderful woman, Anne told me, who had deeply influenced her.

Andre Norton died shortly before the Nebulas, but she left behind a stunning legacy. Andre Norton's first book was published when Anne McCaffrey was six. Her last book is just out. The first works I read by Andre Norton include the haunting "All Cats Are Gray" and *Forerunner Foray*. Although I never had the opportunity to meet her, the imaginative avenues that she opened for me and for others are legend. We will miss this Grand Master, but her influence and her works remain.

This issue carries on the heritage of fine storytelling. Three of our authors—Frederik Pohl, Brian W. Aldiss, and our regular columnist Robert Silverberg—are also Grand Masters. Brian celebrated his

eightieth birthday this past summer, and Fred beat him to that milestone a few years ago. As is evident in the stories here, both men continue to add powerful work to their oeuvres. Andre Norton, Frederik Pohl, Brian W. Aldiss, Anne McCaffrey, and Robert Silverberg helped set the cornerstones of a tradition that constantly reaches out to new readers and continues to produce clear and refreshing new voices. This issue also includes stories by brand-new authors John Phillip Olsen and Lou Antonelli.

Another new writer, Ted Kosmatka, has a story in our next issue. Ted, a laboratory analyst, is a

third-generation steel-industry employee. I met him at the Nebulas, too, when I spied his name on his nametag as he walked across the hotel lobby. In turn, he introduced me to his mother—a twenty-year subscriber to *Asimov's*. Mrs. Kosmatka passed on her own love of SF to Ted when he was twelve and recovering from a near-fatal bout of meningitis.

As long as we pass on our joy of reading, and of reading SF, to the children, and the children's children, science fiction writers will continue to influence each other, perfect their skills, and create new stories for generations to come.



Photo credit: Beth Gwinn

Left to right: Gardner Dozois, Sheila Williams, Mike Resnick, Brian Bieniowski

Although Walter Jon Williams couldn't attend the Nebulas due to illness, we were delighted when he won a Nebula for his novella, "The Green Leopard Plague" (*Asimov's*, October/November 2003). Fortunately, one of our Readers' Award winners, Mike Resnick, was able to attend. Mike's "Travels with My Cats" (February 2004) was named best short story in

our poll. On Saturday morning before the Nebulas, he was feted at our Readers' Award breakfast in the 312 Chicago Restaurant. Other writers and guests in attendance included Connie Willis and her daughter Cordelia, Paul Melko and his wife Stacey, Kevin J. Anderson and Rebecca Moesta, and the singer and SF anthologist, Janis Ian. ○



## ROBERT BURTON, ANATOMIST OF MELANCHOLY

I spoke last time about Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, that marvelous Elizabethan book which under the pretext of exploring the subject of depression gives us an astonishing 900-page survey of virtually all of the science and pseudo-science of its era. But I barely scratched the surface of this lively, irrepressible, and wholly enthralling old tome.

I quoted in that column, and will again now, this description of intention that Burton provides, a choice example of his resonant Elizabethan prose and a fitting characterization both of his purpose and his style:

Give me but a little leave, and I will set before your eyes in brief a stupend, vast, infinite Ocean of incredible madness and folly: a Sea full of shelves and rocks, sands, gulfs, Euripuses, and contrary tides, full of calms, Halcyonian seas, unspeakable misery, such Comedies and Tragedies, such absurd and ridiculous, feral and lamentable fits, that I know not whether they are more to be pitied or derided, or may be believed, but that we daily see the same still practiced in our days, fresh examples, new news, fresh objects of misery and madness in this kind, that are still represented unto us, abroad, at home, in the midst of us, in our bosoms.

This curious man, who lived a cloistered life as an Oxford scholar

from 1593 until his death in 1640, must have read every book in the great university's libraries, combing their pages for pertinent lore on the subject of melancholy and how to escape it. His sources are myriad, from the most ancient writings to the most recent and, as he tells us on an early page, "A dwarf standing on the shoulders of a Giant may see farther than a Giant himself." (This familiar phrase he credits to one Didacus Stella, author of a volume of Biblical commentary.) Burton's text is a colossal webwork of quotations, assembled into a complex structure divided into a number of "partitions," each made up of "sections," "members," and "subsections," along with three long essays labeled "digressions," the whole thing intricately woven together by thoughtful, wry, and frequently profound observations of his own.

To provide an anatomy of melancholy he says he must first provide an anatomy of physiology, for mental states have their origin in the body's own substance. Here he brings forth the old theory of the four humors of the body—blood, phlegm, bile, and serum—and gives particular attention to "black bile," which was supposed to bring about melancholy. This part of the book becomes a long (and, to us, exceedingly quaint) treatise on melancholy's causes, symptoms, and prognosis, all of it now wholly obsolete medically, and much of it cryptic and even opaque to modern readers—but much is charming and fasci-



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nating. (Hypochondria, he tells us, is called that because it is an ailment of the "hypochondries," the section of the abdomen that contains the liver and the spleen: even this propensity for imaginary maladies is thus shown to have a physiological origin.)

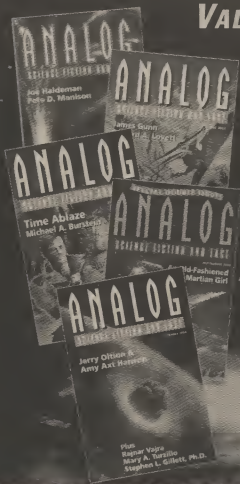
Once he is done with his great jumble of anatomical material, assigning different types of melancholy to different sectors of the body, Burton launches into a section on curing these many varieties of depression, and here we get a summary of seventeenth-century medical practices, which of course includes a good deal of what we would now call magic. This disquisition requires him to examine whether magic actually does work, and he adduces such authorities, no longer known to us, as Caelius, Delrio, Libanius, and Lemnius, who "deny that Spirits or Devils have any power over us, and refer all to natural causes and humours." But then, ever fairminded, he refers us to a second crew of experts—Paracelsus, Agrippa, Pliny, Oswaldus Crollius, Dr. Flud, etc.—who have demonstrated magic's efficacious nature: "They can make fire it shall not burn, fetch back thieves or stolen goods, show their absent faces in a glass, make serpents lie still, stanch blood, salve gouts, epilepsies, bitings of mad dogs, toothache, melancholy, and all the ills of the world, make men immortal, young again, as the Spanish Marquess is said to have done by one of his slaves. . . ." And so on for quite some length.

From there we go to an extensive catalog of medicines, which at times takes on a poetic tone that reminds me of Jack Vance at his best. One kind of melancholy, he

says, is caused by "wind within the hypochondries" that must be expelled, and his long list of specifics for this problem include Bezoar Stone, Calamint, Grain of Paradise, the Blessed Laxative, the Electuary of Laurel, the Powder Against Flatulence, the Florentian Antidote, the Charming Powder, Aromatic Rose Wine, Oil of Spikenard, and Aristolochy, though care must be taken in their use "so that they do not inflame the blood and increase the disease." We are told also of the use of "fomentations, irrigations, inunctions, odoraments," and other treatments for the head and stomach, the value of bloodletting, of applying medicines against the skin, of curing shyness and blushing with a mixture of white lead, camphire, water of nightshade, and nenuphar (or, says another authority he quotes, with water containing frogs' eggs)—on and on and on, a grand melange of what we now know to be, mostly, nonsense. But what glorious nonsense!

And what glorious sidebars he provides along the way. We are informed at one point, with Galileo and Kepler as the source, that heaven is 170,000,803 miles from the Earth, so that a stone dropped from the stars and traveling one hundred miles an hour would take sixty-five years, or more, before it touched ground. (Would it? I haven't checked the arithmetic.) We are told, apropos of a discussion of madness, "that lovers are mad, I think no man will deny. To love and be wise, why, Jupiter himself cannot intend both at once. . . . Love is madness, a hell, an incurable disease." We are told, in passing, of Cornelius Dribble's perpetual-motion machine, about which I wrote last issue. On a nearby page a footnote lets us know

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about the robot that the philosopher Albertus Magnus constructed in the thirteenth century, given to us in this quotation from William Godwin's *Lives of the Necromancers*:

It is related of Albertus that he made an entire man of brass, putting together his limbs under various constellations, and occupying no less than thirty years in its formation. This man would answer all sorts of questions, and was even employed as a domestic. But at length it is said to have become so garrulous that Thomas Aquinas, a pupil of Albertus, finding himself disturbed perpetually by its uncontrollable loquacity, caught up a hammer and beat it to pieces.

Albertus' robot, I like to believe, was governed by the Asimovian Laws of Robotics, and thus made no attempt to defend itself against Aquinas' assault—for otherwise theologians these nine centuries past would have had to get along without the Angelic Doctor's magisterial *Summa Theologica*, which I assume he was in the process of writing when the annoyingly gabby robot came along to distract him.

Back to Burton, though. Here we have him, in a lengthy analysis of human love that takes in both its great benefits and its pathological transformations, offering us a diet to promote chastity, embracing such foods as "Cowcumbers, Melons, Purselan, Water-Lilies, Rue, Woodbine, Ammi, Lettice, which Lemnius so much commends, and Vitex before the rest, which, saith Magninus, hath a wonderful virtue in it." He quotes Amatus Lusitanus on the subject of "a young Jew that was almost mad for Love," and was cured "with the syrup of Hellebore, and

such other evacuations and purges, which are usually prescribed to black choler." There are plenty of other remedies for excessive lust here—pages and pages of them—but, of course, Burton being Burton, we are given a good many cures for impotence as well, since he brings himself ultimately to the conclusion that the best cure for love-melancholy is the fulfillment of desire.

Religious belief, too, can bring on a kind of melancholy, Burton says, in the last and perhaps most startling section of his enormous book. He does not, of course, attack the Church of England, for in his day such an attack would surely have cost him his livelihood (his income came mainly from the various church offices that he held) and perhaps his life. But how scathingly does he write of other religions! After citing "the Mahometan Priests, so cunningly can they gull the commons in all places and Countries," he levels his big guns against "that High Priest of Rome, the dam of that monstrous and superstitious brood, the bull-bellowing Pope, which now rageth in the West, that three-headed Cerberus. Whose religion at this day is mere policy, a state wholly composed of superstition and wit, and needs nothing but wit and superstition to maintain it, that useth Colleges and religious houses to as good purpose as Forts and Castles, and doth more at this day by a company of scribbling Parasites, fiery-spirited Friars, Zealous Anchorites, hypocritical confessors, Janissary Jesuits. . . ." and so on with mounting fury for some pages further.

He is an equal-opportunity chastiser of all religions but his own. The various pagan creeds get full

attention and high eloquence. ("What shall be the end of Idolators, but to degenerate into sticks and stones? of such as worship these Heathen gods, for such gods are a kind of Devils, but to become devils themselves?" Then the back of his hand for the Jews: "No Nation under Heaven can be more sottish, ignorant, blind, superstitious, wilful, obstinate and peevish, tiring themselves with vain ceremonies to no purpose; he that shall but read their Rabbins' ridiculous Comments, their strange Interpretation of Scriptures, their absurd ceremonies, fables, childish tales, which they steadfastly believe, will think they be scarce rational creatures." And Islam, too: "Mahometans are a compound of Gentiles, Jews, and Christians, and so absurd in their ceremonies, as if they had taken that which is most sottish out of every one of them, full of idle fables in their superstitious law, their Alcoran itself a gallimaufry of lies, tales, ceremonies, traditions, precepts, stole from other sects, and confusedly heaped up to delude a company of rude and barbarous clowns. . . .")

Give me no political correctness here. Burton lived four hundred

years ago and we read him to discover the ideas that were current in his era, not to reinforce the attitudes of our own. His book is a masterpiece of strange folklore and forgotten erudition, couched in masterly Elizabethan prose. (He writes, he says, "as a river runs, sometimes precipitate and swift, then dull and slow; now direct, then *per ambages*; now deep, then shallow, now muddy, now clear; now broad, then narrow, doth my style flow; now serious, then light; now comical, then satiricale; now more elaborate, then remiss. . . . And if thou vouchsafe to read this treatise, it shall seem no otherwise to thee, than the way to an ordinary traveller, sometimes fair, sometimes foul, here champaign, there enclosed; barren in one place, better soil in another; by woods, groves, hills, dales, plains, &c.")

I doubt that many of you will vouchsafe to read this treatise, the manifold wonders of which I have hardly begun to elicit here. But there's great richness in it for anyone seeking to explore the stranger byways of medieval human thought as it was understood in that most intellectually fertile place, seventeenth-century England. ○

what I learned playing marathon solitaire on my PC  
when I should have been trying to write this poem,  
and wearing only my underwear and a flannel shirt:

not a damn thing.

and my eyes hurt.

—W. Gregory Stewart

## SETI AND SUCH

no ufos

**P**ardon me, but I feel a rant coming on.

So I'm at a party and in the normal course of chitchat about the weather and the Red Sox and the sorry state of politics, it comes up that I'm a writer. Several utterly predictable questions will follow. "What do you write?" *Answer: Science fiction and fantasy.* "Have you been published?" *Answer: Yes.* "Have I read your work?" *Answer: Probably not.* "Do you make a living at it?" *Answer: Sort of.* Then comes a significant pause. The next question might well be, "How weird are you?" except that most people are far too polite to ask outright. Instead what they will often ask is, "So, do you believe in UFOs?"

*Answer: NO, I DO NOT BELIEVE IN UFOS. I HAVE NEVER SEEN A UFO AND NEITHER HAVE YOU. IF YOU DID SEE SOMETHING THAT YOU THOUGHT WAS A UFO, YOU WERE EITHER MISTAKEN, DELUSIONAL, OR HIGHER THAN THE INTERNATIONAL SPACE STATION.*

There. I feel much better now, thank you.

Except that according to a **Roper Poll** <<http://www.scifi.com/ufo/roper>> taken in 2002, almost half of America believes that we earthlings have been visited by UFOs. And in 1997 a **CNN/Time**

**Poll** <<http://www.cnn.com/US/9706/15/ufo.poll>> found that "80 percent of Americans think the government is hiding knowledge of the existence of extraterrestrial life forms."

So yes, I fully expect to get hate mail.

This isn't to say that I don't believe that there's life on other planets, because I do. And it may well be that there is intelligent life in the universe — in fact, I would be really, really disappointed if someone somehow proved that there wasn't. Luckily for me, such a proof, if it ever comes, isn't likely to occur in my lifetime. But as we saw when we considered **Faster-than-light travel** <<http://www.jimkelly.net/pages/fil.htm>> several installments ago, zipping from star to star is a very tall order indeed. It boggles my mind to think that any thinking entity would go to all that trouble just to lurk—and lurk ineptly, as the UFO apologists would have it. But if you do see a silver pie plate hurtling through the sky, feel free to notify **The National UFO Reporting Center** <<http://www.nuforc.org>>. Just don't tell them that Jim sent you.

*the equation*

In 1961 **Dr. Frank Drake** <<http://www.seti.org/site/pp.asp?>

`c=ktJ2J9MMIsE&b=178943`> proposed his famous equation  $N = R^* \cdot fp \cdot ne \cdot fl \cdot fi \cdot fc \cdot L$  <<http://www.seti.org/site/pp.asp?c=ktJ2J9MMIsE&b=179073>> as a tool to estimate the number (N) of advanced alien civilizations in the Milky Way. For those who are still a bit fuzzy on the Drake variables, here's a quick recap: ( $R^*$ ) is the rate of formation of stars capable of supporting intelligent life times the fraction (fp) of those stars that have planets times the number (ne) of planets per star capable of supporting life times the fraction (fl) of those planets where life evolves times the fraction (fi) of those livable planets where intelligence evolves times the fraction (fc) of intelligent species that bother to communicate times the longevity (L) of those chatty civilizations. For an accessible overview of the thinking behind the equation, try **The Chance of Finding Aliens** <[http://skyandtelescope.com/resources/seti/article\\_244\\_1.asp](http://skyandtelescope.com/resources/seti/article_244_1.asp)> by Alan M. MacRobert and Govert Schilling.

Now typing "Drake Equation" into **Google** <<http://www.google.com>> yields almost half a million hits, which is certainly one measure of fame in this age of the internet. Many of these sites allow you to play with Drake's variables to come up with your own estimate of the number of communicating civilizations in our galactic neighborhood. For example, try this one at the **Extrasolar Planetary Foundation** <[http://www.planetarysystems.org/drake\\_equation.html](http://www.planetarysystems.org/drake_equation.html)>. However, the problem with the Drake Equation is that we have no clue as to what numbers we should plug in for some of the key variables, since we have but one example of intelligent life—ourselves. For example,

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## SCIENCE FICTION

### SALUTES THE WINNERS OF THE 2004 NEBULA AWARDS

#### BEST NOVEL

#### *PALADIN OF SOULS*

Lois McMaster Bujold

#### BEST NOVELLA

#### "THE GREEN LEOPARD PLAGUE"

Walter Jon Williams

(*Asimov's*, October/November 2003)

#### BEST NOVELETTE

#### "Basement Magic"

Ellen Klages

#### BEST SHORT STORY

#### "Coming to Terms"

Eileen Gunn

#### BEST SCRIPT

#### *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*

#### GRAND MASTER

Anne McCaffrey



how often does intelligence arise? And what is the lifespan of the average communicating civilization? Given our woeful lack of understanding of these matters, what the Drake Equation actually calculates is one's optimism—or pessimism—about the chances of finding intelligence elsewhere in the universe.

### searching

About the same time that Frank Drake was developing his equation, **Phillip Morrison** <[http://web.mit.edu/physics/facultyandstaff/faculty/philip\\_morrison.html](http://web.mit.edu/physics/facultyandstaff/faculty/philip_morrison.html)> and **Giuseppe Cocconi** <<http://www.daviddarling.info/encyclopedia/C/Cocconi.html>> were writing their seminal paper “**Searching for Interstellar Communications**” <[http://www.cocconi.org/morris\\_0.htm](http://www.cocconi.org/morris_0.htm)> published in **Nature** <<http://www.nature.com/index.html>> in 1959. Morrison and Cocconi proposed to search for signals from alien civilizations in the microwave portion of the electromagnetic spectrum, specifically around 1420 MHz, the spectral frequency of hydrogen. Most regard this paper as the true beginning of the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI). Morrison and Cocconi knew their ideas would be controversial; at the conclusion of their paper they wrote: “The reader may seek to consign these speculations wholly to the domain of science-fiction. We submit, rather, that the foregoing line of argument demonstrates that the presence of interstellar signals is entirely consistent with all we now know, and that if signals are present the means of detecting them is now at hand. Few

will deny the profound importance, practical and philosophical, which the detection of interstellar communications would have.”

Controversy has dogged SETI from its very earliest days, in part because it appears to many as goofy as ufology. Indeed, some scientists regard it as an utter waste of time. Perhaps this was why **NASA** <<http://www.nasa.gov/home>> was so slow to embrace the idea, participating at first only in some low-level programs. However, in 1992, the space agency initiated the ambitious **High Resolution Microwave Survey (HRMS)** <<http://www.daviddarling.info/encyclopedia/H/HRMS.html>>, which included both an all sky survey and a targeted search for signals. A year later, Congress canceled HRMS and NASA was forced out of SETI. For more about SETI's vicissitudes, click over to Amir Alexander's **The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence: A Short History** <<http://www.planetary.org/html/UPDATES/seti/history/History00.htm>>.

For better or for worse, SETI and science fiction have been linked over the years. In 1982, for example, **Steven Spielberg** <<http://www.spielbergfilms.com>> released **ET** <<http://www.etfansite.com>>, which was the most profitable film of its time. Later that year, **Carl Sagan** <<http://www.carlsagan.com>> and his wife, **Ann Druyan** <<http://www.csicop.org/si/2003-11/ann-druyan.html>>, were having dinner with Spielberg and the conversation turned to SETI. The story goes that at one point Druyan looked pointedly at Spielberg and told him that he “could give Columbus his three ships.” Whether true or not, Spielberg donated one hun-

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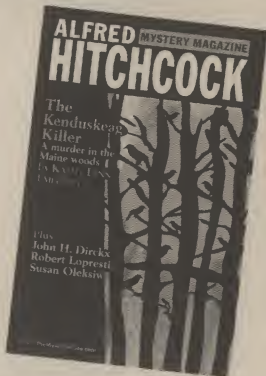
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dred thousand dollars to fund the **Megachannel Extraterrestrial Assay** <<http://www.planetary.org/html/UPDATES/seti/BETA/BETA-story-1.html>> and has continued to be a strong SETI supporter. And in 1998 **David Anderson** <<http://www.astrobio.net/news/article773.html>>, and **Dan Werthimer** <<http://library.thinkquest.org/C003763/print.php?page=interview03&tqskip=1>> proposed to assemble the largest virtual supercomputer on earth, which they named **SETI@home** <<http://setiathome.ssl.berkeley.edu>>. SETI@home was to analyze data from **Project Serendip** <<http://www.planetary.org/html/UPDATES/seti/SERENDIP/default.html>>, SERENDIP being the acronym for Search for Extraterrestrial Radio Emissions from Nearby Developed Intelligent Populations. But funding SETI@home was a hard sell. The **Planetary Society** <<http://www.planetary.org>> offered to pick up part of the tab, but needed a partner with deep pockets. At that time, **Paramount Pictures** <<http://www.paramount.com>> was about to launch **Star Trek: Insurrection** <<http://www.startrek.com/startrek/view/series/MOV/009/index.html>> (one of the better installments of the hallowed but now defunct franchise, it says here), and decided to provide SETI@home with the rest of its funding as a publicity stunt. The PR hacks spun it thus: "For the first time in Star Trek history, Planet Earth is invited to help the crew of the U.S.S. Enterprise in a real search to seek out new life and new civilizations."

Today two non-profits, The Planetary Society and The SETI Institute <<http://www.seti.org>>, carry on the search abandoned by NASA. Both their sites are well worth ex-

ploring. Over at The SETI Institute site, I can particularly recommend the articles on **Interstellar Message Composition** <<http://www.seti.org/site/pp.asp?c=ktJ2J9MMIsE&b=179195>> and **The Social Effects of a Detection** <<http://www.seti.org/site/pp.asp?c=ktJ2J9MMIsE&b=179078>> to budding (and experienced, for that matter) perpetrators of SF. The Planetary Society is more various than The SETI Institute and there is a bit of sprawl to the site; it bills itself as "The largest nonprofit, nongovernmental space advocacy group on Earth." But **The Learning Center** <<http://www.planetary.org/learn/index.html>> is lively and accessible to the layperson and the **News Archive** <<http://www.planetary.org/html/what-is-new.html>> is up to date and comprehensive.

### *new worlds*

Poking around The Planetary Society's site, I came upon a set of pages that described the search for **Extrasolar Planets** <<http://www.planetary.org/extrasolar/index.html>>. Now if you're at all like me, you take delight in all the marvels our exploration of space has revealed in the last few years, most recently from our **rovers on Mars** <<http://marsrovers.jpl.nasa.gov/home>> and the **Cassini-Huygens mission** <<http://saturn.jpl.nasa.gov/home/index.cfm>>. But what well and truly croggles my mind is the fact that we have increased the number of known planets from our own local nine to some 136 as of February 2005, according to the **California Carnegie Planet Search** <[16](http://exoplanets.</a></p>
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org>. And more are being added almost daily. Although there are no pretty photographs to look at, since these objects are all light years away, research into extrasolar planets has already led many to revise estimates upward for the (fp) variable in the Drake equation, that is, the fraction of stars that have planets.

Long before astronomers confirmed the existence of extrasolar planets, science fiction writers were booking excursions to them. It must be admitted that all too many of these planets were shoddily constructed, but there is a long and honored tradition of trying to get world-building right. I remember as a pup writer poring over the late great **Poul Anderson's** <<http://www.catch22.com/SF/ARB/SFA/Anderson,Poul.php3>> essay "How to Build a Planet" in the 1976 edition of the SFWA Handbook. That version of the handbook is long out of print,\* but if you want to peruse God's own handbook on planet construction, check out **World Builders Home Page** <<http://curriculum.calstatela.edu/courses/builders>>. This incomparable resource collects materials for a course taught by Elizabeth Anne Viau at California State University, Los Angeles.

With the advent of the computer, software has been written to assist do-it-yourself worldbuilders. My current favorite is **StarGen—Solar System Generator** <<http://home.comcast.net/~brons/NerdCorner/StarGen/StarGen.html>>. Con-

structed by Jim Burrows, "it's a program for creating moderately believable planetary systems around stars other than our own." I don't know if it's the best, but it's certainly the prettiest. StarGen runs under the Mac OS or Unix; in order to get it up in Windows you need Visual C. But just visiting the examples page may be enough for many.

*exit*

I was an English major in college and am pretty much an autodidact with regards to science and technology. Worldbuilding is still a serious stretch for me. But it's one of my favorite parts of the job of being a skiffy writer. Why? I think that, in part, it's because of the **erector set** <<http://www.ideafinder.com/history/inventions/erectorset.htm>> I played with as a boy. Many of you are too young to remember erector sets, which were the mid-twentieth century version of **Legos** <<http://www.lego.com>>, but I certainly enjoyed mine back in the day. I loved building stuff and making up stories about it. And if a grown-up Jim Kelly could go back in time and tell young Jimmy that someday, instead of building "Mysterious Walking Giant Robots," he'd be using computers to design imaginary solar systems, the kid would have thought that he was bound for science fiction heaven.

And he was. ○

\*Poul's essay, "The Creation of Imaginary Worlds: The World Builder's Handbook and Pocket Companion," which was first published in Reginald Bretnor's *Today and Tomorrow* (1974), is still available in print in *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy* by the editors of *Analog* and Asimov's *Science Fiction*.—Ed.

Frederik Pohl's current principal activity is traveling around the world as much as possible—he visited his seventh (and last, because that's all there are) continent in 2004, and hopes to get to his fifty-first and fifty-second countries in 2006—but he keeps on writing when he can find the time. His short story collection, *Platinum Pohl*, out this year from Tor, is his one hundred and thirty-fifth book. His one hundred and thirty-sixth will be a novel, *Underneath the Mountain*, in which he will bring the ruined old city of Pompeii back to life. In his first tale for us in more than ten years, he takes a harrowing look at the future and a legacy that may be passed on for . . .

# GENERATIONS

Frederik Pohl

Stephen Avedon, B.Sc., M. Ed.

**T**he truth of the matter is that I knew Sheila Carrington was out of my class from the first moment I saw her. That was when we were stuck in the waiting area at LAX, made to mark time until our plane, which had been delayed getting in because of bad weather, would open its doors. What I noticed first, of course, was that she looked very trim and blonde and pretty. The other thing I noticed was that she was busy fending off a plump guy in the next seat who was hitting on her.

I could see right away that she was definitely first class.

And first class is where she went when we boarded the plane, too. I didn't. I was back in steerage, where the seats are constructed for nobody over five feet five and there's always a line for the toilets. Even when the flying is smooth, which this time it wasn't.

The captain turned the seat-belt sign off at cruising altitude, but five minutes later he turned it back on again. "Folks," he said on the horn, his voice deep and, of course, basically Texan, "I really hate to say it but the radar's telling us that this next little bit of air's going to be kind of bumpy. So what we have to ask you to do is return to your seats and fasten your belts. Hopefully the turbulence won't be that long. Then I'm looking for a smooth ride all the way to JFK."

He didn't get what he was looking for, though. The sign was off for maybe ten minutes or so over Arizona, and then it was back on all the way over New Mexico. Even when the sign was off the ride wasn't really smooth.

That didn't bother me much. I don't get airsick, and I was watching the movie, anyway. I barely noticed when the stews began to stagger around and slop us our lunch, choice of some kind of chicken or some kind of beef, until all of a sudden the whole damn airplane took a kind of unexpected roller-coaster dip and slide. Somebody's salad went flying across the aisle and landed in the lap of the lady next to me. So did the stew who was trying to serve it. She caught herself just as she was following the salad into the lady's lap.

Then it got worse.

I'd never had a ride quite like that. For a pretty long time after that first scary drop, the stews were scurrying around to get their carts locked down and themselves strapped into their seats, and nobody from the cockpit was saying anything to us at all. Meanwhile the plane was flopping this way and that and making unpleasant little squeaky and scrappy noises. When the bouncing around eased off a little we got the captain back on the horn. He was more apologetic than ever. There was nothing in the world to worry about, he told us, but there were rules they had to follow. One of the rules was that when an aircraft had been subjected to that much turbulent stress they were supposed to land and check it out before proceeding, so our first landing wasn't going to be at JFK but at Kansas City International. When we got there—the passengers clapped like crazy as we touched down—they made us all get off and sit in the waiting area by the gate.

That was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

The thing is, just as I was reaching for a magazine to read, that nice-looking blonde woman from first class plunked herself down into the seat beside me. "May I?" she asked. But she was already there, and anyway there wasn't any real question about whether she might or might not.

Actually, one of the reasons I'd taken that package tour to Yosemite was that I was sort of hoping to meet some nice, maybe kind of Helen-Hunt-looking, woman to replace the one who'd dumped me at Easter. That hadn't happened.

It wasn't entirely because of my good looks and savoir faire that the woman from first class had joined me, though. Mostly she was trying to get away from the plump little fellow I'd noticed with her before, who was in paper products and had a company hotel suite waiting for him in New York . . . and had already been refused a fourth Cosmopolitan by the stew, even before the worst of the turbulence hit us. I didn't care why she picked that seat. I was just happy to have her there.

I stayed happy, too. Even when I learned that she was some kind of Wall Street lawyer, and so really, definitely out of the class of a physics teacher from Brooklyn Technical High School. Putting it in numerical terms, that's to say about a quarter of a million dollars a year out of my class. Only, because God was being good to me that day, it turned out that her own high school had actually been Brooklyn Tech. She had been ma-



joring in the civil engineering courses, before she changed her mind and decided she was never in this world going to be happy as an engineer and so wound up in Harvard and Harvard Law and the kind of a job that kept flying her all over the place to negotiate merger contracts and IPOs.

She remembered some of her old Tech teachers. I was able to tell her which ones were still there and which ones were retired, and how Mrs. Einborg was still as fat as ever and Miss Kornfeld never did get married, and that the food in the cafeteria was all different now—not so much of the french fries any more, more two-percent milk than Coke—but not really a lot better.

We were there in that airport for nearly three hours. There was plenty of nonstop pissing and moaning from most of the stranded passengers, but those were three very good hours for me. They finally let us get back on the plane—“Good as new, folks, they’ve checked everywhere and there’s no trace of structural damage at all”—and by that time I had her name—“Just call me Sheila”—and she had given me her phone number.

Actually the kind of money Sheila was pulling down didn’t make as much difference as I was afraid it might.

Loaded or not, Sheila was not a high-maintenance date. She didn’t mind that we didn’t go to Twenty-one for lunch and Vail for a skiing weekend. Probably she’d had enough of those things to last her, and anyway there were a lot of things we found to do in New York even on a teacher’s salary. Up to the Cloisters on one Saturday, to the planetarium at the Natural History museum on another. Old movies at MOMA. Swimming at Jones Beach a couple of times in the summer. We went there in her car because it was a Beamer convertible and a lot more comfortable than my old Corolla, but she politely asked me to do the driving and didn’t criticize when I did.

It was a good time. Well, actually it was the best time I’d ever had in my life. The only thing we ever quarreled about was which movie to watch on her industrial-sized television, and we generally settled that by the flip of a coin. When we were in my own place Sheila had no interest in watching the Mets lose their ordained 60 percent of their games, but she was content to let me watch them in one of the two little rooms of my apartment while she curled up in the window of the other, reading one of my physics texts or science magazines. They were recreational reading for her. She still had all of the curiosity about how the universe worked that had made her twelve-year-old self take the entrance exam for Tech. The career had gone a different way, but the interest hadn’t left her. Still fascinated her, in fact. She couldn’t believe what weirdnesses had come along in, say, cosmology since she was in school. Branes? Dark matter? Dark *energy*, for Christ’s sake? The one that really pulled her cork, though, was the announcement that some of the most distant galaxies weren’t slowing down as they fled away from us, as gravitational attraction should have made them do, but were actually speeding up in the universal expansion. “That,” she told me, “is crap, Steve. It doesn’t make sense. Somebody’s made a pretty stupid mistake.” And then, when I explained to her about all the observational evidence, and how many sepa-



rate sources it had come from, she sighed. "Oh, hell, hon," she said. "I don't get any of this at all. Maybe I should sign up for some night courses at CUNY."

"Don't bother," I said. "I'll tutor you."

I did, too. I tutored the hell out of her, all that spring and summer and fall and well into the winter. And the only times that were better than the times when we were walking around the Park and talking, or staying up late to watch Jon Stewart on the "Daily Show" and talking, or lingering over a Japanese or Greek or Indian meal—always pretty cheap places, but places where they didn't mind if we stayed a while, holding hands—the only times that were better than those when we were out of bed, I'm saying, were the times when we were in. That was better than I'd ever had it and, bless her heart, Sheila said it was for her, too.

And then it was Christmas, and we went out to the Island to meet her parents.

That was a little scary. The Carringtons seemed to be happy enough about Sheila and me, though. The only problem I could detect anywhere in the world was still the fact that she made so much more money than I did.

Then it was New Year's. Not just your average New Year's, remember, because this was Happy New Millennium time. The year that was coming up was 2001, and everything was going to be different.

I hoped so, anyway. So when the ball dropped and we had done that first formal New Year's kiss I said, "I wish it could stay this way forever." And Sheila rubbed her cheek against mine and didn't say anything, and I said, "I love you, hon."

She said, "I know."

I said, "I can't imagine a life without you in it."

She was silent for a moment. Then she sat up, wearing the face she always wore when she could see I was stalling about something, and said, "Oh, shut the fuck up, Steve. If you want to ask me something for Christ's sake go ahead and ask it."

So I did. I said, "Sheila, will you marry me?"

"Damn straight I will," she said. "My mom would kill me if I didn't, anyway."

So then we kissed some more, and then she sat back, looking almost as pleased with herself as I was with me. "Actually," she said, patting her hair back into some kind of shape, "it's probably a good idea for us to get married, because I kind of think I'm pregnant."

### Silvie Avedon Khoshaba

**M**y Dad never wanted me to become a physicist because there wasn't any money in it. So I didn't do it. I married one, though, and I never regretted it. I didn't marry Ron because he was a scientist, or at least I don't think that was the reason. I married Ron because he was a hunk, and because I liked the guy a lot, and maybe mostly because he was a hell of a fine folk dancer.

That's where we met, in the little park by the river where our group danced on Tuesday nights in the summer—where my father let me go because there isn't anything very sexy about folk dancing and where I didn't mind going without having a date to bring me, because most of the other girls didn't have one either. Ron and I were both regulars, so I danced with him pretty often. I did my best, trying to be inconspicuous about it, to get next to him when we did the Hora or the Miserlou. I liked the way he spun me around when we were doing that kind of dance. I especially liked the way he did those falling-down-drunk kinds of Greek dances that are for men only, and those of us who weren't men could have a pretty good time sitting on the grass and checking out the beefcake.

I didn't take him seriously, though. How could I?

It wasn't really the fact that he was an Arab, even if an American-born Arab, that worried me, but I couldn't help noticing that he was getting along in years. He must have been at least thirty-five or thirty-six. To me that was Methuselah. I was seventeen. I hadn't even been drafted yet, and he was a lieutenant-colonel, which I knew because sometimes that winter, when we were doing our dancing in the basement of the Y and the skinheads were cruising the streets, he'd show up in uniform so the skinheads wouldn't start something he'd have to finish.

Anyway, what happened was that at one of the Tuesdays toward the end of the summer it rained.

The rain had let up a little after dinner. Most of us hopefuls showed up at eight anyway on the chance the rain wouldn't start up again. We hadn't even finished the first Israeli Hora when it began to come down again. The most hopeful of us didn't give up. We retreated to our cars to wait the rain out, and as I didn't have a car I joined Ron in his. We talked for a while. Then we began to kiss and, hey, like they say, the rest is history.

We didn't rush into anything. We sneaked around for a year and a bit before I decided I wanted something more permanent than an occasional afternoon in the bed in Ron's BOQ at the fort. So I told Dad I wanted to marry this Iraqi-American leaf colonel.

Dad stopped eating when I said that. I'd waited for dinner to tell him, and I'd had our part-time cook make his favorite sauerbraten with red cabbage and potato pancakes, just the way he liked it. He sat for a while rubbing his forehead and looking into space, but not at me. I knew what he was doing—that is, he was rehearsing all the mistakes he'd made bringing me up as a single parent. Lately he'd been doing that a lot. (He hadn't really done that bad a job, you know. When my mother got killed and left him stuck with a two-month-old squalling baby he took a year off and changed my diapers himself. Fortunately there was plenty of money from the indemnities, so he could easily afford a full-time nursemaid, and it all worked out all right. I wasn't wild, you know. I didn't do drugs or anything, but on the other hand I hadn't been a virgin since my sixteenth birthday, and Dad kind of suspected that was the case.)

Finally he said, "I thought you hated Arabs. Because of your mom, I mean."

"Ron was born in Duluth, Minnesota," I told him. "You don't get much more American than Ron Khoshaba."

"He's in the weapons-analysis corps," Dad said. "He could be sent to a combat area any time."

"So could I," I said. "After I was inducted, I mean. So could you, even."

That wasn't very likely. Dad was way deep down in the reserve-activation list on account of being a teacher. He didn't argue about it, though. He just sighed. "I wish you hadn't lost your mom so early," he said meditatively, and then, "Oh, hell, I guess you probably know what you're doing. All right. You've got my blessing. I'd appreciate it if you'd wait until you were, say, nineteen, though."

We did wait. Ron wouldn't have it any other way, because he still had that old-world reverence for fathers. Anyway, we were still getting it on a couple of times a week in Ron's BOQ suite.

There was some disputation about the wedding. Dad and I would have been happy with a justice of the peace. Ron put his foot down. "When my parents came to America they became Lutherans. They had me baptized as a Christian and I guess I still am one. Anyway, you've got a minister right across the road, don't you?"

We did. We had Billy de Blount's father and Dr. de Blount was definitely a minister—Presbyterian instead of Lutheran, sure, but, once we gave in on the church wedding, Ron didn't make a fuss about denominations. Rev. de Blount was an old friend, well, sort-of friend. He had talked my dad into sending me to his Sunday school when I was ten, and sometimes he took Billy and me to some G-rated Disney movie or for a soda at Friendly's Ice Cream. I finally put a stop to that. Although Billy was two years younger than I he had a serious crush on me, and it got annoying.

I think Dad was a little worried that Ron would pull rank on him, since Ron was doing real physics research and Dad was only a high-school teacher getting ready to retire. That didn't happen. Ron wasn't like that. I wouldn't have married him if he was, and anyway the kind of research Ron was doing wasn't anything like the kind Dad had always wished he could be doing himself. The War took care of that. Ron was pretty anal about security, so he never exactly told me what he was doing, but some of his assistants weren't as cautious. So I knew. Basically he was sniffing around captured Islamic positions for traces of radionuclides that didn't belong there. Their checking for isotopes was done down to the parts per trillion level, in the hope that they could keep track of what the Arabs had up their sleeves. And what made Ron go into physics in the first place was exactly the same thing that had done it for Dad. They both had wanted to know what rules the universe ran by. They still did. They spent a lot of after-dinner hours talking about what the Australians and the Scandinavians were doing.

Which wasn't much. Since so many American facilities got merged or shut down entirely due to the War not a lot was happening in theoretical physics. It wasn't actually that much better in most of the rest of the world, either. The Europeans were too busy fighting their own war against the terrorists, with the Islamists a lot closer to European heartlands were to ours. They barely even kept CERN going. And, maybe because they no longer had anybody important to compete against, I guess the Russians and the Chinese had more or less lost interest.

That seemed to piss my father off even more than it did Ron. "You're too young to remember," he'd tell me, "but I was around when places like Fermilab and Stanford and Bell Labs were turning up new stuff every day. You don't know about Bell Labs, do you? They invented the transistor there, and Claude Shannon developed his information theories, and Rudi Kampfner invented the traveling-wave tube and God knows what all else. It wasn't the Arabs that did the Labs in, either. It was just corporate greed."

And so on and on, the two of them taking turns in their nightly deploring contest. I loved them both. Quite a lot, in fact. But sometimes I did wish that they would now and then look on the bright side.

Because, you know, we didn't have that bad a life. My father and I had lived all my life in the big house on the shore that my mother bought for the family just before she got killed. I loved the place. When Dad turned it over to Ron and me as a wedding present I cried. He said it was too much house for a single man. Even with the part-time help we'd always had from the town it was too much house for me, too, but then Ron hired a couple of refugees named Bruce and Rebecca so I could get on with school. Dad didn't move out. Ron wouldn't let him. So Dad took over the maid's quarters on the third floor, had his own sitting room and bath and, quite unnecessarily, kitchen. That meant that the servants had to sleep in the place we fixed up for them in the basement, but it wasn't that bad, really. Anyway they didn't mind. It was undoubtedly better than the plastic tents in the Hessa Hissa camp they'd lived in, back in the Sudan, until the lightning struck and they got that visa to America.

By then I was twenty, going on twenty-one, and just about to start my second year at the local community college. My major wasn't physics. English lit. I still loved listening to Ron and Dad talk about the black holes and the quarks and all, though not enough to have any wish to follow in their footsteps. Thus, an English lit major. The war was going badly, as usual, but we had plenty to eat and plenty of time on our own—well, I mean when Ron hadn't been sent off to poke around Barcelona or Marseilles or Haifa or some other place that we had just recaptured from Islam, before the Islamists recaptured it back. And not counting the optional, but not very optional, third weekend of every month. That's what we spent in our voluntary (but not very voluntary) training with the Citizens' Defense Corps, learning how to make a Molotov cocktail to throw at an Arab tank, if one ever appeared in New Jersey. None ever did. Even the servants had to sign up for the CDC, or risk losing their green cards. They didn't mind. They hadn't forgotten what it was like in Dafur. They had a pretty good practical idea of what Arab tanks could do, too, and anyway all the CDC stuff was entertainingly theoretical. None of us was likely to be called up.

Dad wasn't teaching regularly any more, but he still took on one or two physics classes a semester. It would have made sense for him to take a little flat in Park Slope or Brooklyn Heights, but he wasn't willing to abandon the house Mom had bought for us. Commuting, though, was a problem. Mom had had her own arrangements, at least when the weather was

halfway decent. A hydrofoil would come and pick her up at our little dock and whisk her right across New York Bay to the Battery Park City pier in lower Manhattan, and it didn't even cost her anything because the company paid for the whole thing. Dad wouldn't do that. He didn't have a rich company to pick up the check for him, though he really could have afforded it if he'd wanted to. He said it was because it was too extravagant, but I think it was because it reminded him too much of my mother.

So he got up early every morning he had classes and drove himself in to Brooklyn across the Verrazano. That shot his whole coalcohol ration, but I never used all of mine up and Ron had a surplus—got a field-grade officer's ration to begin with, and was often enough deployed to somewhere where he couldn't use it. So Dad got all the coupons he needed. Besides, we walked a lot when the weather let us.

That was one of the reasons I hated to see the summer come to an end. Well, that and the vine-ripe tomatoes and the corn, of course. Labor Day was pretty much the cutoff for us. We didn't celebrate the holiday by marching in any parade, but it was the alarm-clock ring that told us to get ready for cold weather and school. When I sat on the porch that day, I could see that the seed pods were beginning to drop off the catalpas. Dad and Ron were nursing their beers in one corner of the porch, talking particle physics, as usual, and debating whether to go in for what might be their last swim of the summer. I was on the porch steps trying to get a head start on the school year by reading the American lit text ahead of time. I heard somebody go "psst"—yes, literally "psst"—from behind the hydrangea bushes. The only person I knew who would say "psst" was Billy de Blount. I sighed, turned the book off and stood up. I kept my voice low and said, "For God's sake, Billy, why don't you show yourself like a normal human being?"

He stood up enough so that I could see his head. "Don't take the Lord's name in vain," he ordered. "I just didn't want to disturb your dad and—" he jerked a thumb in Ron's direction—"him."

I have to admit that in some ways I didn't altogether mind having a teenager who had such a crush on me that he hated even to say my husband's name. Still, he really was a pest.

"You disturbed me," I informed him. "What do you want? And come out of those damn bushes."

He didn't come out from behind the hydrangeas. If he had, Ron and Dad could have seen him, and that was something Billy tried to avoid. He did answer the question, though. He peered at a piece of paper in his hand that looked familiar—actually, it turned out to be a page from my father's notebook—and asked, "What is ortho-positronium?"

I held out my hand. "Give me that."

He made a face, but he passed it over. It was a list in Dad's sloppy handwriting:

*g*

*c*

Fine structure constant

Ortho-positronium decay

Planck's constant

The list didn't make a lot more sense to me than it had to Billy. "Where'd you get it?" I demanded.

He hung his head, the way he did. "It was on the lawn. I picked it up. Anyway, when your dad and him were writing this stuff down they were talking about God, and I wondered—"

"You wondered if they were getting religion?"

He didn't answer that, just scowled. Then he said, "So what does it mean?"

"How the hell would I know? Why don't you ask them?"

That time he just pointed, but it answered the question, sort of. Ron and Dad had made their decision. They were already stripped to their shorts, on the way down to the river.

Of course, Billy wouldn't have asked them anything anyhow, since that would have meant actually speaking to my husband. But it made his point. "All right," I said. "I'll ask them when I get a chance. But next time you come to the door and knock. Okay? I'm tired of you sneaking around the house." And then, as he started to turn away, still scowling—he scowled a lot, for a teenager—I had to add, "You sure they were actually talking about God?"

Rebecca had made one of Ron's favorites for supper that night—hamburger Stroganoff, where it didn't matter how tough that range-fed beef was because it had been ground to about the consistency of a Big Mac. I didn't ask the question while we were eating. What we talked about was how muddy the river was getting, and whether our eel population was ever going to recover from the depredations we had waged on it in the bad times before rationing started, when you had to know somebody to get a pork chop at the Safeway. And then we talked about how I felt about starting another school year, and why Ron had to make a quick trip to some damn island in the Caribbean next week. He wouldn't say the "why," of course. He wouldn't even say which island, but Rebecca had already been told to pack both his snorkel and his hill-climbing boots, so I was pretty sure it was Jamaica.

Then Rebecca cleared everything away and Ron tipped the last of the bottle of Peruvian merlot into our glasses. I thought that was a good time to ask them about what Billy had said.

They both looked puzzled. "He thought we were talking about *God*?" Ron said, and Dad said, "Let me see that paper."

When he looked at it he began to laugh. He passed it to Ron, who laughed just about as much. Then Ron leaned over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. He turned to Dad. "You want to show her the book, Steve?"

Still grinning, my father reached over to where he had left his shoulder bag, and pulled out a book. What I mean to say here is a *paper* book. With the data printed on it in *ink*. The cover told me its title was *The Universe Next Door*, and it was written by someone named Marcus Chown. "I've had this for thirty years," Dad informed me. "So when this story about the Moon came along I remembered it and pulled it down to show Ron."

"What story about the Moon?" I asked, but Ron was already talking.

"A lot of it's out of date, of course, but the guy had some interesting ideas," he said.



"Always did," Dad agreed. "Best science writer there was."

I gave them both a look, about ten seconds apiece of my don't-be-such-pains-in-the-ass,-will-you? look. "Ortho-positronium," I reminded them.

"Oh, sorry," Ron apologized. "It's just that it takes a little explaining. Ortho-positronium is—I guess you could call it an element? Sort of, anyway?" He was looking at Dad, who shrugged. "All right," Ron said, "let's say it's some kind of an element. A very simple one. Like hydrogen. Only instead of being made of an electron and a proton, the way hydrogen is, positronium is made of an electron and a positron. You know what a positron is?"

Dad gave him an indignant look. "Of course she knows what a positron is."

I did, more or less—it was like an electron, only it had a positive charge, like a proton, instead of the electron's negative one. I nodded because I was actually understanding what they were talking about. And then, all of a sudden, I wasn't, because they began talking about mirror matter and it didn't really sound as though they were talking to me. "Oh, hell," I said, holding out my hand. "Why don't you just give me the damn book?"

Having the actual book in my hands was better, but not a whole lot better. I was getting lost in stuff about time running backward and baby universes being born, and my father's thirty-year-old scribbles in the margins of the pages didn't help. Then it occurred to me to use the index. That was a lot like looking something up on my screen, though a lot slower, but then I did find out what they were talking about.

There turned out to be more than one kind of positronium, but the kind they were talking about was called ortho-positronium, never mind why. Ortho-positronium was something that got made in particle accelerators, and after it was made it didn't stick around very long. It lived for .000000142 of a second, after which it blew up into three photons and was gone. Or, anyway, that's when it was supposed to do it, but when they came down to measure the time exactly, the damn thing dissolved into photons one tenth of a percent faster than that.

Big deal, right? But they seemed to be sure about the numbers, God knows why, so I kept on reading and—after a lot of really weird stuff about mirror universes and such—I came to some talk about a man named Edward Harrison.

Harrison had an idea that might explain the discrepancy. Suppose, he said, that there's a really advanced race of space aliens, off somewhere in infinite space and time. Suppose one of them wants to understand how the whole universe works. How would they go about it?

Well, if they were like human scientists, Harrison reasoned, they would make something like a computer model that they could study. Only, since they were really advanced superbeings, they would make a really good model. In fact it would be so good in all its details that it would contain every last aspect of the real universe.

Including, for example, us.

And the "us" in that model universe would have no idea they were nothing but computer simulations, as indeed we did not.



All right, I thought that was kind of interesting. Scary, even, although only in the way that ghosts and vampires were scary when you were eight years old and already pretty sure that such things didn't really exist. What I didn't see was what had made it interesting to Ron and Dad right now.

Then I took another look at Dad's scribbles. One of them had a date next to it, and the date was a recent one: Woomara, 24 August 2022.

It only took a moment of searching on my omnibook to find what that meant. A couple of weeks earlier some radioastronomers at the old radio-telescope in Australia were doing some routine testing of their equipment. What that amounted to was just bouncing radar off the corner reflectors that early astronauts had left on the Moon a couple of generations before. And then they reported that, gosh, funny thing, the radar reported that the Moon now seemed to be about 350 meters closer to the Earth than it was supposed to be.

Well, that was peculiar, though what it meant I could not say.

So then I tried to track down every one of Dad's scribbles in the margins of the Chown book. There were dozens of them. Most of them were only updating a lot of things Chown had got wrong, because he had written about them way back before the turn of the century and a lot had happened since. Some were just kind of puzzling, like a note about something called the heavy neutrino that was supposed to be like a hundred million billion times the mass of a proton—but when they finally caught one and measured it it was only about ten billion times heavier.

Then I hit a man's name—John D. Barrow—and when my searcher finally located him it produced a paper he had written that answered all the questions.

If some superbeings did make that kind of a model and we were in it, Barrow said, they might not get everything straight on their first try. They would want to know if that was the case, of course, so they would be careful to build some kind of an error-checker into their model. Something that could detect mistakes . . . and then correct them.

So, to do its job, every once in a while the error-checker would make little changes in the model universe's programming—that is, in its basic physical laws.

What that meant was that until the error-checker did its job, sometimes things wouldn't exactly add up in the model. Computation and observation might give numbers that were a tad different from each other—I don't mean big time, I mean like maybe a difference in the tenth or twelfth decimal. Like, Barrow said, the afore-mentioned apparent variation of a few parts per million in the fine structure constant.

That was one of the things that had been on Dad's little list, I remembered. It wasn't all. There was also the way the Moon had suddenly seemed to jump into a closer orbit. Or the heavy neutrino thing. Or the way this ortho-positronium stuff decayed a little bit too fast. So I turned off my book, and closed Dad's paper-and-print one, and went out to the kitchen to see how Rebecca was coming along with dinner. And I thought, no matter what Dad thought of my career choices, it might be a good idea if I tried to sign up for some physics or astronomy courses this semester.

\* \* \*

Because Labor Day was late that year, Tuesday was the first day of school. It rained. Cold breezes came in off the ocean. Summer looked like it was finally, definitely over.

That is always a pretty sad time of the year for me, though not for the reasons my husband thinks. It's really just because of the weather. September means that pretty soon the ice and snow will be coming, and all those lovely green landscapes will turn to brown and black, and all the butterflies will be heading for Cape May and the long flutter across the bay to Delmarva and their winter home in Mexico.

What Ron thinks it is, of course, is because of what 9/11 means to me. He doesn't want me sitting around the house on the day when I might accidentally catch a glimpse of the pictures the government makes the newspeople show on every anniversary of the day, so we citizens won't forget to hate the Islamic terrorists. It's always the same scene they show, too. The two towers are standing there with one of them on fire already. Then the second jet slides silent and deadly across the sky. Until it passes behind the tower that's burning, and, a few moments later, a great big tulip of flame pops out of the middle of the other tower. That was the scene that had sent shivers of horror over a thousand audiences, over the decades since it happened. Especially—yes, Ron wasn't totally wrong—especially for me. Because I knew very well that what that flame jet contained, among a whole lot of other things, was the few puffs of thousand-degree plasma that were all that there was left of my mom.

So I can't deny that the subject crossed my mind now and then on that day. I didn't cry, though. Not even once. Not even when I was in the ladies' room, in the break between World Lit 211 and Poli Sci 218, and no one was there to hear. And I wasn't surprised when I came out of my last class for the day and Ron was standing there with a white-rose wrist corsage in one hand and my dancing shoes in the other. "Feel like a couple of lesginkas tonight, hon? Maybe dinner first at that oyster place down by the water?"

As I say, he was a sweet man.

So we did have the dinner—bluefish for him, pepper shrimp for me—and Ron was just paying the check when his phone chirped. The voice was my father's, upset, shouting so loud that I could hear the phone across the table. "It's crazy, Ron," he yelled. "Jesus! Can you believe it?"

For some reason my husband reached over and put his arm around me then. His voice was tight when he asked, "Believe what, Steve?"

"You didn't hear? Christ, turn your damn omni on! All the labs are reporting it—Argo-Fermi, Caltech, four or five others. The spectra went nuts for all of them at the same time. It's the fine structure constant, Ron! It isn't constant any more!"

### Brigadier General Ronald R. Khoshaba

**E**ven now I have trouble believing that what Steve Avedon told me was true, but there it was. Every lab was confirming it—not only what was

left of the American labs but ultimately CERN and Bologna and Beijing as well. And not just the fine structure constant, either. That radar measurement that put the Moon closer than it should have been wasn't because the Moon had moved, it was because  $c$ , that utterly unchangeable speed of light called  $c$ , had gone and changed on us and was now just that little bit faster. Half a dozen other numbers that had been holy writ for generations were suddenly in doubt, too. And so the question that we faced—and that the whole scientific community faced, and before long that the whole world faced—was: who was doing this? And was it possible that all those long-ago speculations had any conceivable basis in fact?

Common sense said "No!" Well, that wasn't really it. What common sense actually said was, "Holy crap, man, are you out of your mind?" I mean, ideas like that weren't *science*. They were the stuff of the electronic games the little kids were playing when their parents weren't paying attention, because they were busy on their own computers. Comic-book stuff. Nothing that any sensible person would believe in for a single second.

Except that even the sensible people had just about run out of alternative explanations for the way scientific dogma was turning out to be just dumb-headed *wrong*. So we sensible people were stuck.

We couldn't believe it, and couldn't dismiss it, either. The evidence was right there, in every physics lab and astronomical observatory in the world. Like it or not, there was a real, non-zero possibility that somebody—some Somebody, somewhere or other—was running a simulation of a universe as some kind of an experiment, and that simulated universe was the one we all lived in.

Well, in a certain way that wasn't all bad, you know. Since Somebody Else was making up the rules that this universe ran by we didn't have to drive ourselves crazy trying to make sense of the contradictions. For instance, now we didn't have to invent negative gravity to explain the acceleration of distant galaxies. Nor did we have to postulate such weird concepts as scalar fields—that is, particles like a photon or proton, but incomparably bigger, in fact light-years in diameter—just so we could account for some anomalous clumping in some other galaxies. We didn't need to account for anything at all, really. Anything that was puzzling was, hey, just one more glitch in the superbeings' simulation. Made science a lot easier.

But all of that was a long time ago. When Silvie was still my wife, when the United States was still run by the President and the Congress, when nobody had yet heard of the Doctrine of the Beloved Experimenter.

Still, I should have guessed that some human beings would have seen a way to do themselves some good out of it. Somebody always had, out of every other unexpected disaster in human history, hadn't they? Why should this be any different?

The big thing on my mind that day wasn't scientific anomalies. I was more concerned about how badly the War was going. The War had never gone very well, but I was just beginning to see just how bad badly could be.

All my life I had hoped that some day I would get a chance to go back

and visit Baghdad, which was where my parents had lived up until the time that Saddam made the whole country of Iraq unlivable for them. They talked a lot about the old place while I was growing up in Minnesota. Homesick, I guess, and probably that made them glamorize it. What they made it sound like was a real Ali Baba-Scheherezade kind of movie-set place, only with flush toilets.

Well, Baghdad wasn't like that any more. (Though neither was anything else.)

Apart from all the other things the War had done, it made a pretty big change in my personal life. Congress got nervous, and so weapons research got a huge infusion of money. The Fort doubled its lab space. So then they needed somebody with the right degrees and the amount of right at-the-front experience to head it up. The one they picked was me. I was never sure why. Silvie—we were still married then—refused to believe that it was just that I was Iraqi by ancestry and the government wanted to show all the other Arab-Americans that Arabs were considered as loyal as anybody else, but I was never really convinced that that hadn't been a big part of the reason.

Naturally the promotion was the end of my career as a working scientist, even as the kind of working scientist that sniffed around captured Islamist labs for signs of worrisome weaponry. I had now become an administrator.

Whether I was qualified for that sort of thing or not is a whole other question. The government didn't care much about physics any more. Biowarfare looked cheap and effective. And what, for instance, did I know about polymerase chain reactions or maintaining a database of aerosolizable organic molecules? Not much, surely, but things like that were pretty basic to the Fort's work those days. We just didn't make nasties to kill Arabs with, we did our best to identify Arab bioweapon nasties before they spread enough to kill too many of our people. Like, for instance, inventing quick-acting techniques to electrospray suspicious compounds into a mass spectrometer and—well, never mind. That's the general idea, anyway.

Of course, we did do the nasties, too, because the DOD was convinced that you could never have too much of a bad thing. The big debate in the Fort one week was picking the best ways to deploy the toxic strains of Sargasso actinobacteria and firmicutes that the biomass people had come up with. The way they seemed to think would be most convenient was to seed the shallow waters of Arab bathing beaches with them.

That was when I realized I was losing Silvie. "But you're talking about killing *children*," she complained when she heard about it. She was really, really angry, but I refused to discuss it with her. She wasn't supposed to know about those things, and I had a pretty good idea of which of my scientists had leaked it to her. I thought about turning the leaker in, but that would have been too personally embarrassing, since he, as it happened, had recently become my wife's lover.

But, as I say, that was a long time ago.

When those Beloved Experimenter kooks began to show up I didn't

take them very seriously at first. The Fort wasn't their first target, and I didn't really care much about what they were doing to the churches.

Not to just some of the churches, either. What I mean is to all of them. I guess that was predictable enough. The churches were the institutions that got hurt worst when the idea of an alien experimenter began to take hold, and human beings, like hyenas, do love to pick on the weakest animals. So first, at Sunday services—well, at the Jewish Saturday ones too, because the Beloveds were a pretty ecumenical lot—you'd see one or two pickets wearing sandwich boards with messages like, "You do know it's all a lie, don't you?" Then you'd begin to see dozens of the pickets, then hundreds, marching civilly enough around the churches' parking lots. Then, when it got to be thousands, the picketers hardly had anybody left to picket anymore, because by then they way outnumbered the handful of people that were still inside.

Then, when the religions were so battered that they weren't much fun any more, the Beloveds began to move on to other targets. First they did the Congress and the Senate and the White House and all the lesser governing bodies.

Why did they pick the politicians? Certainly not because there was anything the politicians could do, because there wasn't. But when things go wrong you blame the politicians. You don't necessarily have any better ideas than they do, but they're there for the purpose of being blamed. That's the American way.

Then, I guess having run out of more powerful people to blame, they got around to us.

Actually I was a little surprised they had taken so long. It seemed to me that the Fort, and all the other scientific labs and institutions in the world, were tempting targets for more reasons than one. The Beloved Experimenter people really got a kick out of having this new proof that the world's most celebrated scientists were as full of crap as their local Congressman.

We couldn't debate them any more, either. That was a letdown, because we'd really been used to those debates, you know. Since time immemorial, we scientists had been plagued by arguments from the inerrant Bible people and the flat-Earthers and the anti-evolutionists and the flying saucerers and every other sort of nut that thought their intuitions trumped natural physical law. We didn't always win the debates. Witness Galileo and the Roman Inquisition, for instance. But we did win sometimes then and couldn't win ever again now, because this time the flakes and the nutcases weren't any wronger than we had been all along.

Even when the demonstrators multiplied into the thousands they weren't a serious physical threat to us. The town cops just borrowed more crowd-control stuff from neighboring municipalities, and the Beloveds got herded off to side streets and parks where no one would be much bothered by them. Half of the cops were overseas veterans from places like Iberia and the Moroccan beaches. After their struggles with the mujahadeen, a few thousand chanting crazies were no problem.

Until they were.

The biggest mob yet turned up on Christmas Eve. They were divided

about half and half between the ones chanting slogans about the Beloved and the ones who were singing "Silent Night" and "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen." They weren't divided any other way. They stuck together no matter what the cops did and, of course, because of the holidays the police force was depleted. The cops left on duty couldn't hold them. Two or three thousand of the demonstrators came boiling through our gates, and then it was up to our MPs. Who were, God (if any) be thanked, up to the task, because the MPs' numbers weren't depleted at all. None of them had received any Christmas leave; the Fort had abolished all holidays long before. Those guys were combat veterans, too, and they were spoiling for the fight because policy had made us keep them out of all the crowd-control problems that the town cops were supposed to handle. Military didn't bother with civilian and civilian didn't touch military, those were the rules. The MPs kept the mob moving right down to the parade ground, and then they began carving them up into parcels of a hundred demonstrators or so and herding them to places where they could conveniently be detained for as long as we liked.

When I saw from my window that Billy de Blount was in the crowd it occurred to me that it would be a generous act to have him brought up to my office, maybe even to share my Christmas Eve meal.

I don't know why I wanted to be generous to the little turd. He had been nothing but an annoyance all those years when he was growing up across the street. Not so big an annoyance, though, that I wanted to stick him with the dried food packets and unbottled water which were all he would get from my MPs.

I always thought that was no way for a civilized human being to live. Certainly I wouldn't like it for myself, and I don't suppose my cousin Fahzeed had liked it either.

I haven't mentioned Fahzeed. His problem was that his parents had emigrated to the States just as mine had, all right, but they had taken their time about it. They wanted to be absolutely *sure* before they moved. So Fahzeed had been born in Basra. Which meant that when the War got sticky and the American government began rounding up all the country's Arabs and Islamists they left me alone. U.S. born, already a first lieutenant in the American army, I was a protected species. Fahzeed wasn't. He got a resettlement camp in Utah that was called the Salt Lake Protective Custody Depot, along with eighteen or twenty thousand other possible, but not definite enough to make it to the penal camps in Alaska and Guam, security risks.

I only visited Fahzeed at his camp once. That was plenty. I never wanted to see again how that kind of confinement could transform a bright, well educated professor of meteorological science into a crotchety old fart with serious complaints about the wilted condition of the mess hall's salad greens.

Well, if my father hadn't crossed his fingers for all of us and taken that great jump into the American unknown when he did—why, that could have been me. Fighting to get the last bowl of Jell-O at supper, viewed with suspicion by my fellow inmates because I refused to join the impro-



vised mosques they had set up, where the principal sermon subject was the iniquity of that Great Satan, the United States of America.

But I had, I was reminded, problems nearer at hand. What reminded me was MP Major Kressmer, tapping at my door—which was, of course, already open. I gave him the usual now-what frown.

"I'm just reporting that it's all secure now, sir. What are your orders?"

"Feed them," I said. "Keep them overnight. Around daybreak you can start releasing them, fifteen or twenty at a time."

"Yes, sir," he said, turning to go.

"Oh, and one more thing, Major," I said. "Have de Blount brought up here."

Up close, Billy was a lot taller and skinnier than I remembered him, and he had grown a fairly creditable beard. He walked in under his own power, the two MP escorts staying just outside the door until I waved them away. He took a seat without being invited, and leaned back to see what I was going to say. He didn't look uneasy, not even uncomfortable, just patient.

"Hello, Billy," I said. "Merry Christmas." He didn't respond to that, just looked a little more patient, so I got specific. "I'm just about to have my dinner sent up from the mess. It'll be turkey, of course, with the usual trimmings and stuff."

"Fine," he said, dismissing the subject. "Is that why you had me brought up here?"

"Not really, no. Your father came to see me the other day."

That made him grin. "Sure he did. He probably told you his Sunday attendance is down 50 percent, but it's really nearer eighty."

"He did say that, yes. It isn't only your father's church, though, is it? Father Alexius at St. Viator's told me that they've cut out two of the three morning masses, and they're running short of altar boys."

He said reasonably, "What did they expect? Their people have been lied to all their lives. There isn't any God, just some Experimenter that doesn't give a damn what they do. There isn't any Heaven, there isn't any Hell. So now they understand that it doesn't matter if you're a good guy or a shitheel. You don't get rewarded, and you don't get punished, either. So Pop can't scare them into showing up every Sunday any more. Can't bribe them, either. Doesn't have anything to bribe them with. So naturally they came to us, Ron. We're giving them the truth."

God knows I'm not a religious person, but he was getting under my skin. "But that's not all religion is, Billy. What about morality?"

"Oh, now, Ron," he said, "really. Do you honestly think it's a sin worth going to hell for to eat pork or fail to bang your head on a rug six times a day? And I'm not even talking about the people who thought their God's morality commanded them to murder as many unbelievers as they could, from the Crusaders to Hamas."

"Besides that sort of thing," I said. "I mean thou shalt not kill and thou shalt not steal and thou shalt not bear false witness."

He gave the sort of look that one gives to a person who has made a legitimate debating point. It was the first time. He thought for a moment,



and then he said, "You're right about that, Ron, kind of. We're going to have to give them some kind of commandments, aren't we? As soon as I make them up. Now, what were you saying about turkey?"

That wasn't the last time I saw Billy de Blount, just the last time that I was physically in the same room with him. That kind of close encounter didn't happen again. Not even when he and his team of tame biochemists commandeered the Fort, because by then I was two or three thousand miles away, being reeducated in the Salt Lake Correctional Compound. (Yes. Same place. Different name but the same place that had held, among others, my cousin Fahzeed. I never did find out what became of Fahzeed, but I have a pretty good idea it wasn't anything nice.)

I did see a lot of Billy de Blount in the Correctional Compound. Had no choice. We inmates were made to watch him on the TV whenever he was doing something important, like ordering another retaliatory strike against the Syrians or the Iraqis, or whoever. Or announcing the development of a new cannabis strain for, what did they say? Stress reduction and recreation? Or whatever. Billy wasn't the president, exactly, or whatever the Experimenter people called the guy who did the kind of things that an elected president used to do. But he sure did get a lot of digital time.

Some of the people I knew were really surprised when the Experimenter groups got into politics. I wasn't. Where else did they have to go?

I wasn't surprised that they won pretty much every race they got into, either. The regular politicians were pretty much licked before they got started. The population was really shook up by then. They wanted to kick somebody's ass for messing up their lives, and who was a better target than the old-style politicians? Who, you had to admit, by and large well deserved it, anyway.

What did surprise me about all the Experimenters having all that power, though, was what use they made of it. I would not have thought that they would finally have won the Islamist War, and I certainly didn't expect them to win it the way they did.

### First Intermediary Willis Wardman de Blount

I do my weekly TV address on Tuesdays. That's the bottom of the week, when the animals need to be thrown some new bone to get them through to the weekend. Marta and Heinrich were prepping me for it when a page brought me another letter from my father.

I didn't greet it with joy. It had been nearly a week since the last one, and I had almost begun to hope that he had given up on me. Or died. Or at least fallen into some kind of irreversible coma, but no such luck. What was left of the physical body he had been born with was still hanging on, and that old brain was still working away. "What's that?" Marta asked, not taking her eyes off the tan she was mixing for my cheeks. Sometimes she forgets herself, but when I gave her a look she paled and fussed harder over the mixing palette.

She probably did know, when she sneaked a look at the folded paper. It was written in my father's unmistakable crabbed hand. As well as everything else he has lost, he doesn't have much in the way of vocal cords any more, so he can't dictate like a normal person. That doesn't keep him from being my most dependable correspondent. He doesn't actually have a lot of choice about that, since he isn't allowed to correspond with anybody else, just lucky me. I don't usually read his letters. There's no reason to, because they all say pretty much the same thing, so I just flame them and go on with whatever I'm doing. This time I said, "Give me a match." Heinrich always has one, or something like it, because he's smoking again. He listened to the bone I threw almost a year ago, when I informed the people that our scientists were pretty sure that by the end of the decade they'd be able to repair the alveoli that cigarette smoke damages. He went right out and picked up a carton of Old Golds—they say you can get them on any street corner, but I never thought it worthwhile to ban them entirely. Then he went shopping. God knows where, maybe some antique store. Anyway he got himself a solid gold cigarette lighter that still worked.

It made a nice flame, and he held it out to me. I started to shove Dad's letter into it and changed my mind. "Let's get the goddam hair done," I said, sticking the letter into a pocket. "Don't you know I'm speaking to the people in ten minutes?"

Marta took a chance. She didn't look up from her work, just said, "And they love you for it, First Intermediary."

Well, they do, kind of. The trouble is a day later they forget what I've done for them, and then they always want more and more. It's so unjust. I won their goddam war for them, didn't I? You'd think that would be enough all by itself. But no. They want more and more and more.

And I give to them, because I'm afraid of what might happen if I stop. "Less talk," I said, "and more getting me ready there, Marta."

What I promised the animals that week, I think, was more public executions on TV. Not just killing somebody by shooting or electrocuting, the way we'd been doing it, either. We'd make a little crime play for it. Like we'd find some photogenic criminal and cast him as a spy from the Arab war, and the good guys catch him when he's trying to get away across the frozen, let's say Hudson River, and they shoot him. Just wounding him, though. Then he falls into the river and can't get out. Then the last scenes are him trying to scratch his way out from under the ice as he's drowning. Powerful stuff. Only when that greaseball Hemphill suggested it I said, "For God's sake, how are you going to get any felon to volunteer for it?" And he had an answer for that. We'd shoot a kind of a pilot where the convict would do all his apparent dying by the special-effects way Hollywood had always done it, morphing and computer-generating and like that, so nobody's really getting hurt. Then we'd tack on a little trailer showing how we did it with the special effects, and we'd have the con sitting in the screening room and looking proud as Punch at seeing himself on the screen. And then, Hemphill said, well pleased with himself and grinning like the asshole he was, we're going to reshoot those last scenes, only this time we don't do any special effects. The con really dies. And

that's the version that goes up onto the satellite for the animals to gawk at. But then, see, when we make another one we show the next con we've picked the fake version, and we tell him when it's over he's going to get a pardon and freedom and a new identity so as not to spoil it for the audience. Then he's happy to volunteer for a starring role of his own.

Worked, too. Hemphill had a lot of ideas. I didn't like him having so many of them, though, especially when he began taking bows for them. So now he's retired for health reasons, in the same hospice as my Dad.

Of course, I didn't explain any of that in my broadcast. It went well, according to the instant reads. And then I went back to the war room for a staff conference with my cabinet.

I'm not a micromanager. When it comes to agriculture or manufacturing or crime suppression I leave it to my lieutenants. They do a good job, because they know what would happen if they didn't. What my cabinet is supposed to do is think up exciting new programs for me to promise the people every Tuesday.

They're good at it, sometimes maybe a little bit too good. Hemphill isn't the only pain in the ass on my so-called "A Team." Danny Kirsten is just as bad. Maybe worse. He's the one I put in charge of Rites and Rituals, which is a big part of the Beloved Experimenter code. Which he knows. And therefore feels free to interrupt almost any team meeting with his inspiration of the week, like right after that broadcast: "First Intermediary! Hey! Listen to this! Suppose we teach kids to count, one to a hundred, using the periodic table instead of numbers. Like hydrogen, helium, lithium, beryllium instead of like, one, two, three, four." And when everybody had a good laugh about that, then, "Okay. Then how about this. When somebody's done something bad like, I don't know, murdering somebody or stealing something, maybe we don't just put them in jail the way we do now. What we do is, get this, we *shun* them. You know? The way the old Amish used to do? So they'll die, all right, because nobody will give them food or even sell it to them, but we're not exactly killing them, you see, because—"

I stopped him there. "Shut up, Danny," I said. "Has anybody got any real business?"

Then Larry Willett stood up. "Talking about prisons, they're having a lot of trouble in them," he said, not that we all didn't know that but just so as to lay the groundwork for what came next. "Guards are getting killed, every con has a weapon or two, the cons are pretty nearly running the prisons. I think I know what could straighten that out in a hurry, First Intermediary. How about if we give one of them a little of your thousand-to-one treatment? Lock one of the prisons up, get all the guards and civilians out and then *pow!*"

I knew what the "pow" was.

I should. I invented it. It was the way I had won the war against the Arab terrorists. For every one of our guys who died, I let the Arabs know, I would bomb, gas, or biokill a thousand of them. Since the Arabs didn't come in convenient thousand-person packs I waited until maybe a hundred or so of ours had been killed by snipers or suicide bombers or whatever. Then I wiped out some Arab town of, say, a hundred thousand.

I mean, after all, the one thing we had plenty of was things to kill people with. I admit that the plan didn't work right away. The whole war escalated. But after I'd done Cairo, Baghdad, Ryad, and, hell, I can't remember all the others, their killing began to stop. It wasn't so much that we defeated them in any military way. It was just that we could kill a lot more people than they could, and we made them see that there was a real chance, if this kept on, that sooner or later they might just run out of Arabs.

I encourage discussion, within limits. Maurie Haglaund was the first with his hand up. "What if we can't get all the guards out?"

"Cost of doing business," Willett said complacently. "We'll pay indemnities to their families."

"But some of the cons will be there for minor crimes, or some of them getting close to parole. Do they get killed with everybody else?"

Willet spread his hands. "Fortunes of war," he said. "And what are you worrying about? Didn't you ever hear of collateral damage? In the War a lot of the Arabs we killed were women, seniors, and babies. We didn't let that stop us, did we?"

There was an immediate silence while the others waited to see how I would respond to that. I wasn't angry at Willett, though. I had heard worse. I had been called a mass murderer and a genocider, which I guess I was, though mostly by people who were now in one of those prisons. "Cost it out," I said. "I like it. And that's about enough for today."

And then, back in my own quarters, waiting to see if any of the individual Team members would show up as petitioners, I remembered Dad's letter. I knew what it would more or less say, because all the others had said just about the same thing. All the same I took it out of my pocket, poured myself a decent shot of twenty-year-old Scotch and opened it up.

It said:

"Billy, suppose when you go to sleep tonight an angel, or perhaps just me, your father, appears in a dream and says, 'Look. If this alien experimenter wanted to make a complete model of a universe wouldn't he make it really complete? Including, let's say, God? And a heaven? And a hell?' And, dear Billy, are you really so sure he didn't?"

Some petitioner was knocking on the door by the time I finished it. It was not a good time for me to be petitioned. My father was a crazy old fart, all right, but after all these years he could still make me blow my top with rage. I crumpled the letter up and tossed it toward the fireplace, and then I opened the door.

It was that greatest of all shitheads, Danny Kirsten. "First Intermediary," he said, ducking his head and smiling up at me, "I just want to say how much I hate that idiot, Willett. And I'm sorry to have wasted your time. But what I wanted to ask is, what do you think, could I appear at your side next time you talk to the people? And would you be willing to wear vestments?"

I wouldn't have thought anything could make me madder, but he did it. "God damn you, Danny," I said—I guess, shouted, "the answer is fucking no. To that. To anything else you might ask, and to anyone else who might

come by this evening to ask for anything at all." And because I didn't want to actually kill him I turned around and left the room, and I slammed the door behind me.

### The Elevated Daniel Kirsten, Who Was Prophesied

**I**f You are indeed there, O God, let me make these facts known to You.

As to the conversion of former churches and other temples: 30 percent of them deteriorated so severely during the interregnum that they can only be pulled down. Another 45 percent are still in the process of restoration, but the remaining 15 percent are completely renewed and reconsecrated, with all old icons and symbols wholly effaced.

As to Divine Science: nearly every old telescope with an aperture greater than 1.5 meters has been refurbished when necessary and set to the continuous exploration of Your infinite universe.

As to Doctrine: a new catechism for senior citizens is now being completed, to add to those already established for adults, teenagers and younger children. The Reproval measures for senior citizens who fail in this subject are the same as for younger children, namely withholding of one or more, but not more than three, meals, and sleep deprivation for not more than twenty-four hours.

As to the Giver of the Word and His Son: they are both resting in the Place of Meditation. Their physical condition is as good as is feasible; the Giver still retains the ability to swallow and stand up. At holidays, Giver de Blount appears on all video channels, fully robed and smiling. That's just His physical image, naturally. His message is spoken by a carefully chosen and morally sound actor, and it is hoped that before long some more sophisticated method of stimulating the appropriate areas of the brain will not only allow us to cause Him to smile but even to lipsync His holiday messages. His Son, of course, is never publicly displayed. It upsets Him. He says troublesome things and becomes unhappy.

Finally, O (I presume) God, when I picked from the fireplace that sacred Letter from the Giver of the Word I supposed it to be a sign from You. I do hope I was right. The thing is, (I hope) God, I don't doubt but I have recently ordered some new measures, including the True Believer Faith Brainscan for every citizen above the age of six, with compulsory reindocination for those who fail the test. So, You see, I would hate to think that this, or any of the other measures we've taken, is wrong, because it's getting to be a good deal too late to take them back. ○

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Robert Reed's most recent novel, *The Well of Stars*, came out from Tor in April and his new short story collection, *The Cuckoo's Boys*, was published around the same time by Golden Gryphon Press. In his latest story, he reveals what it takes to survive if you're . . .

# FINISHED

Robert Reed

What did I plan? Very little, in truth. An evening walk accompanied by the scent of flowers and dampened earth, the lingering heat of the day taken as a reassurance, ancient and holy. I was genuinely happy, as usual. Like a hundred other contented walkers, I wandered through the linear woods, past lovers' groves and pocket-sized sanctuaries and ornamental ponds jammed full of golden orfes and platinum lungfish. When I felt as if I should be tired, I sat on a hard steel bench to rest. People smiled as they passed, or they didn't smile. But I showed everyone a wide grin, and sometimes I offered a pleasant word, and one or two of the strangers paused long enough to begin a brief conversation.

One man—a rather old man, and I remember little else—asked, "And how are you today?"

Ignoring the implication, I said, "Fine."

I observed, "It's a very pleasant evening."

"Very pleasant," he agreed.

My bench was near a busy avenue, and sometimes I would study one of the sleek little cars rushing past.

"The end of a wonderful day," he continued.

I looked again at his soft face, committing none of it to memory. But I kept smiling, and, with a tone that was nothing but polite, I remarked, "The sun's setting earlier now. Isn't it?"

The banal recognition of a season's progression—that was my only intent. But the face colored, and then with a stiff, easy anger, the man said, "What does it matter to *you*? It's always the same day, after all."

Hardly. Yet I said nothing.

He eventually grew tired of my silence and wandered off. With a memory as selective as it is graceful, I tried to forget him. But since I'm talking about him now, I plainly didn't succeed. And looking back on the incident, I have to admit that the stranger perhaps had some little role in what happened next.

I planned nothing.



But a keen little anger grabbed me, and I rose up from the bench, and, like every pedestrian before me, I followed the path to the edge of the avenue. Later, I was told that I looked like someone lost in deep thought, and I suppose I was. Yet I have no memory of the moment. According to witnesses, I took a long look up the road before stepping forward with my right foot. The traffic AI stabbed my eyes with its brightest beam, shouting, "Go back!" But I stepped forward again, without hesitation, plunging directly into the oncoming traffic.

A little pink Cheetah slammed on its brakes. But it was an old car with worn pads—a little detail that couldn't have found its way into my calculations—and despite the heroic efforts of its AI pilot, the car was still moving at better than eighty kilometers an hour when it shattered my hip and threw my limp body across the hood, my chest and then my astonished face slamming into the windshield's flexing glass.

Again, I tumbled.

Then I found myself sprawled in a heap on the hot pavement.

For a thousand years, I lay alone. Then a single face appeared, scared and sorry and pale and beautiful. Gazing down through the mayhem, she said, "Oh, God. Oh, shit!"

With my battered mouth, I said, "Hello."

Leaking a sloppy laugh, I told her, "No, really, I'll be fine."

Then I asked, "What's your name?"

"Careless," she said. "Stupid," she said. And then she said, "Or Bonnie. Take your pick."

I picked Bonnie.

A beautiful young woman, she had short dark hair arranged in a fetching fish-scale pattern and a sweet face made with bright brown eyes and skin that looked too smooth and clear to be skin. On most occasions, her smile came easily, but it could be a crooked smile, laced with weariness and a gentle sadness. There was a girlish lightness to her voice, but in difficult circumstances, that voice and the pretty face were capable of surprising strength. "What should I do?" she asked the crumpled figure at her feet. "What do you need?"

"Help," I muttered, answering both questions.

Others had gathered on the curb, observing the two of us. Yet she noticed nothing but me, kneeling beside me, grasping a hand without a second thought. "Do you need a hospital? Should I call somebody—?"

"There's a clinic up the road," I mentioned.

"An ambulance," one of our spectators recommended.

"Just help me to your car and take me there," I suggested. Then I made a joke, promising, "I won't bleed on your seat."

Bless her, she recognized my humor and flashed a little smile. Realizing that my shattered legs couldn't hold themselves upright, much less carry the wreckage on top of them, Bonnie grabbed me under the arms and pulled. But I was too heavy, and after a few hard tugs, she carefully set me down again, asking our audience, "Could somebody lend a hand?"

A pair of finished people stood among the others. But it was a teenage boy, big and raw, who leaped forward. He seemed thrilled by the chance



to drag me across the pavement, practically throwing me into the waiting vehicle. Then with a cleansing brush of the hands, he asked, "Anything hurt?"

"Everything hurts," I admitted.

He didn't believe me. He laughed and stared at the beautiful woman, relishing the chance to be part of this little drama. I was nothing now. I was a sack of dislocated parts and bottled memories, and he thoroughly ignored me, asking the only one who mattered, "Do you need me to ride along?"

But Bonnie had already climbed inside, telling her car, "Now. Hurry."

The ride took just long enough for me to thank her once more and absorb a few more apologies. Then as we pulled up in front of the nondescript clinic, I offered my name. She repeated, "Justin," and dabbed at a tear. Once again, I told her, "Thank you." Then I said, "Bonnie," for the first time, and she seemed to notice the emotions wrapped inside my sloppy voice.

Her AI must have called ahead; an attendant had already rolled out into the parking lot to wait for us.

"I'll pay for everything," Bonnie told the machine.

She couldn't afford the first two minutes. Her old car proved that she was a person of modest means.

"This was my fault entirely," I confessed. Then I lied, claiming, "Besides, my insurance covers everything imaginable."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Dinner," I said. "If you want, buy me a little dinner."

The attendant was carrying me through the clinic door, an army of fingers already assessing the damage.

Bonnie repeated, "Dinner," before asking, "When?"

"Tonight," I suggested.

Then I asked, "Have you eaten?"

She shook her head. "No."

To the machines gathering around me, I asked, "How long will this take?"

The damage was severe but ordinary. Nothing too exceptional had to be fabricated. Thirty-five minutes was the verdict, and, with an intentionally pitiful voice, I asked, "Will you wait for me?"

As the door closed, Bonnie rubbed her hands together, tilted her head to one side and smiled in her sad, sweet fashion. "I guess I am waiting," she muttered. "Yes."

Men instantly took notice of Bonnie. Perhaps her body was too meaty to belong to a model, but that was no failure. She was taller than most females, and she had an inviting walk that any man younger than ninety would notice from the Moon. Twice I saw wives or girlfriends chastising their men for gawking, and a pair of women sitting in the front of the restaurant mouthed the word, "Sweet," as my date innocently passed by their table.

I was feeling happy and sick, and very wicked, and I felt a little awful for what I had done, and a little thrilled by what I dreamed of doing.

"I've never been here," she confessed, watching the robot staff skitter from table to table, serving people like myself. "This seems like a nice place."

"It is nice," I promised. "And thank you for joining me."

Of course, I'd given her no choice. But during that thirty-five minute wait, Bonnie had driven home and changed clothes, returning to the clinic smelling of perfume and youth. She let me pat the top of a hand, just for a moment, and then, before either one of us could gauge her response, I pulled my hand back again. And smiled. And, with a quiet but thoroughly fascinated voice, I invited her to tell me about herself.

Some details were memorable. Others slipped from my grasp before I could decide whether or not to keep them. But who doesn't experience the world in such a sloppily selective way? Even with a precious someone, not every facet can be embraced inside a single evening.

What I learned was that Bonnie worked at the university as a technician, in a DNA paleontologist's lab. She had been married once, briefly. Then she lived with the wrong man for several years; that relationship mercifully had ended the previous winter. She was raised Christian, but I don't remember which species. Plainly, she wasn't swayed by the recent reactionary noise against people like me. Watching my eyes, she touched my hand, admitting, "I'm going to be thirty in another three months."

"Thirty," I repeated.

"That can be an ominous age," I said.

Her hand withdrew as she nodded in agreement.

Our meals came and were consumed, and the bill arrived along with a pair of sweet mints. The final tally took her by surprise. But one of us had left the table a few minutes ago, and, of course, I had purged myself, putting my food back into the restaurant's common pot, the lamb and buttery potatoes destined to be knitted back together again, the next shepherd's pie indistinguishable from the last.

Bonnie paid for her meal and for renting my food, and then graciously allowed me to tip the restaurant's owner. A finished woman, as it happened.

"Good night, you two kittens," the woman told us as we left.

Bonnie drove me to my house.

I knew she didn't want to come inside. For a multitude of fine reasons—old heartaches, her Christian upbringing, and my own odd nature—Bonnie pulled away while we sat on my long driveway.

There were several ways to attack the moment.

What I decided to do, and what worked better than I hoped: I turned to my new friend, mentioning, "You haven't asked about me."

She seemed embarrassed.

"Anything," I said. "Ask anything."

Bonnie was wearing the sort of clinging blouse and slacks that a modern woman wears on a first date. Everything was revealed, yet nothing was. While a hand nervously played with an old-fashioned button, she asked, "How long ago . . . did you do it. . . ?"

"Ten years and two months, approximately."

The early days of this business, in other words.

"Okay," she whispered. Then, "How old were you—?"

"Forty-nine years, eleven months."

She couldn't decide what bothered her more, my being finished or my apparent age. "So you're twenty years older than me," she muttered, speaking mostly to herself. "Or thirty, including the last ten. I don't think I've ever gone out with anyone quite that—"

"Why?" I said, interrupting her.

She fell silent, nervous for every reason.

Looking into the wide brown eyes, I said, "That's what you want to know. Why did I do it? So find the breath and ask me."

"Why did you?"

I intended to tell the story, but the intuition of a middle-aged man took hold. The better course was to take her hand and lift it to my mouth, kissing a warm knuckle and then the knuckle beside it, and, with my tongue, tasting the salty heat between those two trembling fingers.

"Not tonight," I told her.

I said, "Another time, perhaps."

Then I climbed out of her old pink Cheetah, smiling with all the warmth I could manage, asking, "Do you believe in Fate, Bonnie?"

We taste food. Our bodies feel heat and fatigue. Urges older than our species still rule us, and every finished person is grateful for that continuity. Yet even the intelligent unfinished person, informed and utterly modern, has to be reminded of essentials that everyone should know: We are not machines, and we are not dead. Today, for the first time in human history, there happens to be a third state of existence: Alive, dead, and finished. And, like the living, we have the capacity to learn and gradually improve our nature, and then, should circumstances shift, we possess a substantial, almost human capacity for change.

Another evening found us enjoying an intimate embrace. Bonnie's salty sweat mingled with my sweet, lightly scented sweat, and her nervousness collapsed into a girlish joy. What we had just done was wicked, and fun. What we would do next was something she never imagined possible. "Not in my life," she admitted. And then in the next instant, with a laughing apology, she exclaimed, "That was a sloppy choice of words. Sorry."

But I laughed too. Louder than her, in fact.

After the next pause, she asked, "Is it the same?"

"Is what the same?"

"The *feel* of it," she said. Her pretty face floated above me, hands digging beneath the moistened sheets. "When you climax—"

"Better."

"Really?"

"But that's because of you," I told her. "Otherwise, no. It's pretty much the same old bliss."

She was suspicious, but what soul wouldn't wish such a compliment? Against her better instincts, Bonnie smiled, and then, after some more digging beneath the sheets, she remarked, "You don't act like a middle-aged man."

"Hydraulics are an old science," I replied.

She considered my body and my face. I have a handsome face, I'd like

to believe. Not old but proud of its maturity, enough gray in the illusionary hair to let the casual eye pin down my finishing age. With her free hand, she swept the hair out of my eyes, and then, in a quiet, almost embarrassed tone, she asked, "Is it like they say?"

"Is what like what?"

But she realized that she was mangling the question. "People claim it feels like living the same day, without end. If you're finished. You don't have the same sense of time—"

"In one sense," I agreed.

But after my next mock-breath, I explained, "Time announces itself in many ways. I have biorhythms. My mind still demands sleep on a regular schedule. And I can still read a clock. For instance, I know it's half past midnight, which means that according to an utterly arbitrary system, a new day has begun. Dawn would be the more natural beginning point, I've always thought. But I'm not going to be the one to tear down everybody else's conventions."

She nodded. Sighed.

I pulled her up on top of me, hips rubbing. "Something else," I said. "Ask."

"Why?" she whispered.

"Why did I allow myself to be finished?"

"Were you—?"

"Sick? No."

Another nod was followed by a deeper, almost tattered sigh.

"I was almost fifty years old," I explained. "Which is a good age to be a man, I think. Experience. A measure of wisdom. But the body has already failed noticeably, and the sharpest mind at sixty—if you are a man—is never as keen as it was ten years before."

She said nothing, moving her body, trying to match my rhythm.

"Women are different," I allowed. "They seem to have two popular ages for finishing. Older, post-menopausal women can enjoy it greatly. And vibrant youngsters still in their twenties or thirties. But there aren't many in their forties. Studies show. Even if the woman picks a good day to be finished . . . a moment when her mood is even, her hormones in check . . . well, not as many of you seem to love that age, I've noticed. . . ."

She nodded, seemingly agreeing with me. Then she shuddered, sobbing and pressing her body flush against my mine. And with a low, throaty voice, she asked, "Were you talking? I wasn't listening."

I gave a low grunt.

"Sorry," she muttered.

Then she touched my face, and, with a genuinely mystified voice, asked, "Why are you crying. . . ?"

Bonnie's closest friend was the same age but less pretty—a proper woman, well-dressed and infinitely suspicious. The three of us shared an uncomfortable dinner in Bonnie's little apartment, and then some mysterious errand sent my girlfriend out the door. The two women had come up with this glaringly obvious plan. Suddenly alone with me, the friend used a cutting stare, announcing, "My father is finished."

I nodded, trying to appear attentive.

"In fact, he was one of the first. Four years before you did it, about."

"Interesting," I offered.

She shrugged, unimpressed by interest. Her expression hardened to just short of a glare. "Dad was dying. Pancreatic cancer."

"Awful stuff," I said.

"I got out of school for the day. I went with him and Mom to the clinic." Suspicious eyes looked past me. "He was weak and dying, and I was thankful this new technology could save him . . . and I was very hopeful. . ."

I gave a nod. Nothing more.

"The machines rolled him away," she reported. Then, with a barely contained anger, she asked, "How long does the process take?"

"Minutes," I offered.

"Boiling him down to nothing."

To be replicated, the brain had to be dismantled. A sophisticated holo of the original was implanted inside a nearly indestructible crystal. Experience and new technologies have accelerated the process somewhat, but there is no means, proven or theoretical, that allows a person to be finished without the total eradication of the original body and its resident mind.

"He was a sick old man," she reported. "Then he was this crystal lump as big as a walnut, and then he had this entirely different body. It was supposed to look like him, and feel pretty much the same . . . but they still haven't learned how to make a realistic chassis. . ."

"It's a nagging problem," I agreed. "Unless you embrace your new existence, of course. Then it isn't a problem, but a kind of blessing. An emblem, and a treasured part of your finished identity—"

"It costs," she complained.

There were some stiff maintenance fees, true.

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"Between the finishing and all the troubles with his new body—"

"Death would have been cheaper," I interrupted. "That's what you realized, isn't it?"

The woman shuddered, a cold and familiar pain working its way down her back. But as awful as that sounded, she couldn't argue with me. "It ate up most of their savings," she complained.

What could I say?

"Of course, Dad eventually wanted my mother to get finished, too."

"I see."

"But their finances were a mess."

"Loans are available," I mentioned. "Because the finished person can live for another thousand years, or longer, the clinics offer some very charitable terms."

"Except Mom didn't want any part of that." She was her mother's child, and she still agreed with the scared old woman. "If you're finished, you're finished. You stop learning."

"Not true."

"Yes it is!"

"No," I snapped back. "The new mind's design doesn't let fresh synapses form. But that's why it's so durable. Instead, you use subsidiary memory sinks and plenty of them, and as you learn all of the tricks—"

"He stopped changing."

I fell silent.

"My father went into the clinic as a sick man," she reported. "And the machine that came out . . . it was a *sick* machine, exhausted and feeling all these phantom pains running through it. . . ."

"The doctors take precautions now," I told her. "They can limit certain sensations beforehand—"

"He's always going to be dying . . . forever. . . ."

The apartment door began to open.

"I don't approve of you," the friend blurted. "I just wanted to tell you, and tell you why not."

I nodded as if I had learned something. As if I respected her honesty. Then as Bonnie stepped into the room—a wary attitude on her face and in her body—I said to no one in particular, "That's why if you're going to be finished, it's best to do it before you get sick. On a good day, if you can manage it."

I sighed.

To the floor, I said, "On your very best day, hopefully."

My best day was a sunny, gloriously warm Thursday. High-pressure centers have this way of causing rushes at the clinics, but I'd set up my appointment well in advance. The weather was nothing but good fortune. Arriving fifteen minutes early, I wore casual clothes and an easy smile. I was rested and well fed, and since I had sworn off sex for the last few days, I felt pleasantly horny—a good quality to lock into your soul. If any doubt had whispered to me, I would have postponed the event until the doubt died. If a cloud had drifted across the sun, I would have waited in the parking lot for the shadow to pass. But the sky was a steely blue, glo-



rious and eternal, and my only little doubt was in entering the clinic alone.

"But alone is best," somebody had warned me. "Anyone else would be a distraction for you. An imposition. Trust me about this."

I did trust her, and, of course, she was entirely correct.

"Justin Gable," I told the man at the counter. "I'm at—"

"Two fifteen. Yes, sir. Right this way, Mr. Gable."

An honored guest, I felt like. I felt as if I was walking toward an elaborate celebration, or, at the very least, a tidy but significant ceremony. Every stereotypic image of looming gallows or tunnels leading to bright lights was left at the front door. I felt thrilled, even giddy. For the first time in years, I whistled as I walked. Without a gram of shame, I flirted with my female nurse, and then my female doctor—finished souls, both of them. With a haste born of practice and experience, they quickly placed me inside a warm bath of benign fluids, and, before my mood could dip, even slightly, they slipped a cocktail of neurotoxins into my happy red blood.

During the next furious minutes, microchines invaded and mapped my brain, consuming my neurons as they moved.

Inside a second room, a standard crystal was configured along lines defined by my delicate wiring, and, inside a third room, entirely different machines fashioned a body worthy of any paying customer. Then I found myself sitting on a soft couch, inside a fourth room, wearing my original clothes and with barely fifty minutes lost. And exactly as they had promised, I needed just another few moments to adapt to my very new circumstances.

The smiling staff congratulated me.

Alone, I walked outside. A little patch of clouds had covered the sun, but it didn't matter. In some deep way, I could still feel the sun's bright glare, just as I feel it today, warming me to my ceramic bones.

She was waiting where I had left her, sitting inside my car.

I drove us to my house—a smaller, more modest abode in those days—and she made a convincing show of treating me exactly as she had before. Not once did she ask if I felt different. Never did she comment on my new body. Our sex was scrupulously ordinary, pleasant but nothing more. Then I woke that next morning, and because I couldn't help myself, I said, "I know the time. And I can see that it's raining. But you know, I feel pretty much the same as I did yesterday afternoon."

Pretty much isn't the same as perfect. Even a mind composed of hard frozen synapses contains a certain play of mood, of emotions and alertness. The soul remains flexible enough that when your lover smiles in a grim fashion, you worry. When she says, "I'm leaving you, Justin," it hurts. It hurts badly, and even after the surprise fades, you continue to ache. For months, and for years, even. Forever, if you would allow it.

But I won't allow it.

"What about all your promises?" I blurted.

"Oh, those were lies," she admitted calmly.

"And what about helping with my medical bills?"

"I'm not giving you any money, darling."

"But I can't afford this body," I complained, "and I still owe hundreds of thousands for this brain. And you told me . . . you claimed you'd help me—"

"And I will help," she said, glancing down at her twice-eaten eggs. "But you're a bright enough man, and if you think about this problem, just for a moment or two, you'll see for yourself what I was going to suggest."

"Do you remember?" Bonnie would ask. "What happened ten weeks ago? Ten days ago? Or how about ten minutes ago? I'm just curious, Justin. What do you remember?"

At first, she was simply curious. The questions were offered in passing, and I was entirely responsible for my answers. But as her interest sharpened, her ear became more critical, and she tested me, pressing for salient details. Mentioning a specific date, she asked, "What was I wearing? Where did we eat? And what did the man in the green suit say to me?"

"You were wearing a wonderful little holo-dress, flowers changing to seeds and then back to flowers again." I dipped into an assortment of memory sinks, my eyes staring off into the foggy distance. "We ate in that Sudanese restaurant, and you had the eland, and you had shoes. Yes. Black leather with brass buckles."

"Go on."

"But the man wasn't wearing green," I reported. "It was more gold, his suit was. I don't remember his shoes, sorry. But he had this square face and a gold ring through his cheek, and he stared at you. I remember that very well. We walked into the place, and he watched you constantly. I made a joke, or you did—"

"Playing with himself—"

"Under the table, yes. I said, 'You're making that poor gentleman crazy, darling.' And then all at once he stood up and came over to us . . . in his gold-green suit . . . and he told you, 'When you get tired of that dildo, why don't you try a real man?'"

"You remember," she said happily.

"And I remember what you asked him. 'Why? Do you know a real man?'"

She was embarrassed, and pleased, laughing at the shared memory.

Like anyone in her position, Bonnie wanted to know what I could do, and what I could not do. Yes, I explained, I had limits in personal growth. For better or worse, my nature was essentially changeless. In another hundred years, if someone gave me a personality inventory, I would test out as a man still just shy of fifty: A middle-aged outlook; neatness at home; a mature man's patience, and, hopefully, a measure of wisdom. Plus my present level of smoldering passion, freed from the vagaries of hormones, would hold rock solid.

"I'll be better in bed than most hundred and fifty year-old men," I joked.

A smile widened, but there was no laughter. Then, with a serious voice—a thoughtful and worried but distinctly determined voice—Bonnie announced, "I want to have children."

"I've got half a dozen vials filled up with my frozen sperm," I promised. "For when the time comes."

But she hadn't mentioned my participation, and she didn't mention it

now. Instead, she took a deep breath before saying, "They can harvest a woman's eggs too. After the brain's gone, I mean."

"And they're making spectacular progress with artificial wombs," I added. "In a year or two, or ten at the most—"

"What about work?" she interrupted. "Learning new jobs and the like . . . you didn't know much about cybernetics before this, but now you're some kind of consultant—"

"I lobby for the rights of the finished," I said, not for the first time. "My work earns me a small stipend."

True enough.

"If we're going to live for another century," she said, "and for a thousand centuries after that . . . can these little memory sinks keep adapting us to all the coming changes. . . ?"

With an open, patient face, I reminded her, "Technologies only grow stronger."

"Yet if we want . . . draining whatever's inside those sinks . . . we can forget what we want to forget, too. Right?"

"Which is a great gift, if you think about it."

She heard something ominous in the words. But she was a brave soul looking hard at things she wouldn't have considered just a few months ago. "Well, even if I *was* thinking about it," she finally admitted. "I can barely pay my rent, much less make the down payment."

We were spending the night at my substantial house—a telling detail. Bonnie was sitting in my bed, her young body illuminated by a waning moon. Not quite looking at me, she said, "I don't know what I'm thinking. Because I could never afford it."

I waited, letting the silence frighten her.

And then with a calm, warm tone, I asked, "But imagine, darling. What if some good heart was able to *help* you?"

More weeks passed, but I remember little about them. Bonnie had a spectacular fight with her best friend, centering on issues she wouldn't discuss with me, and two attempts at reconciliation went for naught. Which left me as her closest friend as well as her lover, and, with that new power, I did very little. Just the occasional word of advice; a slight coaxing masked as praise. In glowing terms, I spoke about her body and beauty, and when we were in public, I practically reveled at the lustful stares of strangers. But the telling event was elsewhere, and inevitable. Bonnie was twenty-nine years and eleven months old, and with that birthday looming, she said, "Okay, my mind's made up."

I smiled, just enough.

Then I set out to prepare her, legally and emotionally.

My attorney was only too happy to help. A jolly fat man in life, he remained that way today—a comfortable bulk wrapped around an immortal smile. "You've picked a great moment," he promised. A wide hand offered itself to my lover. "This is the new-generation skin. Study it. Isn't it natural? Touch it now. Prick it. If you want, lick it. No? Well, believe me. You're going to look like an angel beside this clunky old automaton."

"Hey," I complained. "I'm counting my pennies for an upgrade."

Everyone laughed, although Bonnie felt ill at ease. Yet she never lost her will, never needed so much as a soft word of encouragement. Then, later, once the appropriate forms and declarations had been signed and witnessed, my jolly attorney said, "A word with you, Justin?"

Bonnie waited for me in the lobby.

Straight away, my attorney asked, "Do you know how beautiful that woman is?"

"No," I kidded.

He laughed, winked knowingly, and then said, "Seriously. This is not like the others that you've introduced me to. No elegant silver in the hair. No false teeth or bothersome grandkids. And that face isn't another bag of good and botched plastic surgeries, either."

"But she is rather poor—" I began.

"Fuck money. So long as it's just her money." He laughed until he looked red-faced and breathless. "Poor is perfect, in fact. Like it was with you. It helps the soul come to terms with the world's realities."

Pride flickering, I asked, "Will she be as successful as I am?"

"And then some!" His laughter filled the room. "I mean it, Justin. She's going to have a great time. I've seen this new skin stretched over a woman's frame, and I've felt it, and I think she's going to be pleased. You're going to be very pleased. Frankly, she's going to be fighting off the potential suitors. And for each one that she doesn't fight off—"

"Yeah."

"Of course, you'll earn just the standard commission for bringing her in," he admitted. "Until Bonnie can work off her own debts—"

"I realize."

"But for every CEO-type that she captures," he continued, "I'll make sure that you get your 5 percent out of her windfall."

I still owed a tidy fortune to my makers. But I was immortal, and they could afford to be patient. All of their clients were immortal, and they could take an extraordinarily long view when it came to their business.

"More pennies for the saving," he sang out.

"Sure," I said, nodding amiably. "I'll never forget that."

An appointment was made at my clinic, but Bonnie woke the day before with a smile. "Look at it out there," she said. It was a cold but utterly bright morning, three days shy of her thirtieth birthday. "Do you think we could get in? If we went down there this minute—?"

"Now?"

"I really feel in the mood," she promised.

Somehow, I wasn't ready. But I took Bonnie at her word and carefully hid my own nervousness. Accompanying her to the clinic, I repeated the old advice. "You should go in alone. Really, I'd be a—"

"Distraction. I agree."

Why did that hurt? And why, even after I used every reliable trick, did those three words continue to gnaw at me?

"No, this is best," she assured me. "Going in early like this, I mean. I think some of my colleagues and friends are planning an intervention, which has to come tonight, of course . . ." She laughed softly, asking,

"Wouldn't that be something if we let them. . . ? If I get a good enough body, and if we kept the lights in the room down low enough so they couldn't tell—?"

"Are you happy?"

"Completely."

"You're certain?"

Bonnie didn't quite look at me. Then she wasn't speaking just to me, explaining, "Until a few weeks ago, I wasn't happy. Not like I thought I should be in my life. But I kept telling myself that if I just kept plugging along, eventually, maybe I'd run into somebody . . ."

Neither of us laughed.

Pulling into the half-filled parking lot, she said, "Maybe they won't have a slot for me now."

For her, they would make a slot.

"Kiss me. For luck."

I did what she wanted. I kissed her on the lips and told her, "I'll see you soon," with a voice that sounded perfectly genuine. I even managed to smile, and Bonnie gave me a distracted smile and wink in return, and then she walked alone up to the front door and stepped out of sight.

I waited.

For maybe twenty seconds, I managed to do nothing.

But I have this ungraceful habit. This inclination—a reflex—that remains fixed in my nature. Preyed upon by doubts, I always try to follow. And afterward, I always make myself forget that I followed. What was different this time was that my reflex struck earlier than normal. I took the clinic by surprise, which makes me feel a little better. Stepping out of the Cheetah, I started to chase after Bonnie, a quick walk becoming a near-sprint, and because another patron had stopped inside the open door, thanking one of the doctors or one of the machines, I managed to slip into the lobby before any locks could be secured.

A nurse was leading Bonnie into the back rooms.

"Wait!" I cried out.

A young man, finished and fit, vaulted over the counter. I was tackled and rudely shoved to the floor, but I managed to say, "You don't need to! I seduced you to do this! They pay me—!"

A hand covered my mouth, choking off my voice.

Bonnie's hand, I realized.

Just like that first time, the pretty face hovered above me. But on this cold morning, she smiled with a certain fetching melancholy, and a calm, hard, and almost disappointed voice said, "I'm not an idiot, Justin. I figured it out for myself, almost from the first day."

Her hand lifted, and she rose to her feet.

"Don't go back there," I called out. "Not now, darling. Not while you're angry like this, because you'll *always* be—!"

"Except I'm not angry," she replied. And with a hard, wise smile, she added, "In fact, darling, this is better. I'm happy enough, but I also feel suspicious right now. Toward you, and everybody. And really, if you try and think about it, isn't that the best way to travel through the next hundred thousand years. . . ?" ○

# EPITHALAMION

You pull me out of the darkness, Sun of Morning,  
and I warm to your regard. It is a long journey  
out of cold which bunches me into a fist.

You are only the brightest star of many for a long time,  
then you are the star of my centering.

I grow hair; my volatiles warm; you draw me  
and I yearn toward you like an eager virgin,  
flying, flying.

A glint on one of your retinue gives me his name:  
Hyakutake.

I do not know this. I do not regard  
small devices of carbon.

My hair grows; I am your queen,  
my love for you is measured in miles per second.  
It's been a long time, love.

Shall we dance? Shall it be a wedding dance?  
I race down the aisle past your attendants,  
flaunting my beauty. My veil is diaphanous, flowing,  
glowing, nuptial raiment fit for a cosmic wife.

Now I am hot! Now I am alight!  
I fling myself around you,  
driven, pulled on gravity's ribbon  
heart-racing close to the furnace of your huge love.

Then away.

Must I leave? My momentum says:

Go, girl, back to the cloud, back to the old neighborhood,  
lurk shyly for ten thousand years, until another time.

The master will call you again.

No other star will draw you, ignite you, pull you away.

Love will not be denied;  
I am Sun's bride.

—Mary A. Turzillo





# PIPELINE

Brian W. Aldiss

The August celebration of Brian Aldiss's eightieth birthday is only one event in a very busy year. Brian tells us that the music for his opera, *Oedipus on Mars*, has been composed by a wizard in Santa Monica. The movie of his book, *Brothers of the Head*, screens in September nearly simultaneously with Tachyon Publications' release of his short stories collection, *Cultural Breaks*. In "Pipeline," Brian recounts the taut and fast-paced tale of an architect attempting a dangerous journey along the length of his brilliant creation.

Carl Roddard paced up and down the chamber of the Interior Minister. The floor was tiled. The sound of his footsteps drowned out the screech of the noisy air-conditioning. The Interior Minister sat placidly behind his desk. He smoked a cigarette. Behind him hung an oil portrait of President Firadzov, smiling. He looked up at the ceiling of the chamber. Beyond his narrow window, the sun ruled over the city of Ashkabad. Ashkabad, the capital of the Central Asian republic of Turkmenistan, was where the pipeline began.

Roddard ceased his pacing and confronted the Minister across his desk. He said, "Minister, your position is untenable. You do not have it in your power to nationalize the pipeline. Particularly at this late stage."

The Minister flicked ash. "We understand the pipeline is American. But it runs for the first seventy-two miles through territory that is Turkmenistan. Neither fact is under dispute. It is fitting that our forces protect this stretch from terrorism."

A stale odor permeated the chamber, as if it smelt ancient deceits.

"You don't have the fire power," Carl told him. "You don't control the air. Besides, our contract was drawn up nine years ago. This wild claim was not mentioned at that time. Why bring this difficulty up now?"

With a slight smile, the Minister replied, "There has been regime change since then." He rose to his feet. "Now this meeting will close, Mr. Roddard. No oil will flow through the pipeline until this matter of sover-

eighty is resolved. My government will not permit me to turn on the tap till then. Good day."

Carl's auto was waiting in the shade of the Ministry. He told the driver to take him to the American quarter. Once through the blazing streets, and the various checkpoints, he went straight to the Embassy.

Carl was a big man who thought big. He had been in Central Asia, on and off, for nine years. He was Chief Architect of the Pipeline Project, and employed by Butterfield-Chou-Wolff, the biggest consortium on the face of the planet. Still he took his problems to the American Ambassador to Turkmenistan, Stanley Cogan.

Stanley was with his wife, Charlotte, and just finishing lunch. He stood up, wiping his mouth on his table napkin.

"Hi, Stan, Charlie! Sorry to break in."

"Have a chair, Carl. Good to see you. You want something to eat? How was it with that snake of an Interior Minister?"

Carl drew up a chair. "Not good. They've set us up." He told Stanley of his meeting. "The essence of it is their demand to nationalize the first two hundred miles of the pipeline. It's meaningless—and they know it."

Stanley looked thoughtful. "So what are they after, springing this on us? Can't be money. Money is going to pour into this little tinpot state once the taps are turned. So why do they delay?"

"Search me. National pride?"

Charlotte looked over her shoulder to see that no servants were lingering. She said, "And what will they do with all the money? If precedents are anything to go by, they will not invest it on the infrastructure of the country, on much needed hospitals and better housing. No, it'll go into explosives."

Stanley told his wife, mildly, "Darling, these are not Arabs we're dealing with. Central Asians are rather different."

Charlotte shrugged. She poured Carl a glass of wine. He sipped it gratefully. The wine was imported from Italy, like many supplies in Turkmenistan.

The ambassador swiveled in his chair to stare out of the window. Beyond the small garden, a sentry stood armed and alert at the gate. "Have you spoken yet to the top brass at Butterfield-Chou-Wolff?"

"No. I drove straight here. BCW would probably want to give in. We can't do that. Suoyue has to be in our hands from start to finish. It's Security." With a tinge of sarcasm, he had used Suoyue, the common Chinese name for the pipeline.

"Of course, Firadzov is behind this," Charlotte said, thoughtfully. Firadzov, the President of Turkmenistan, was the victor of a coup earlier in the previous year.

"Not a cockroach moves without Firadzov's say-so," Stanley replied. He gazed at his wife.

"So?"

"Ziviad Haydor."

Both men looked at her blankly.

"Ziviad Haydor," Charlotte repeated. "That rare thing, a powerful Turkmen dissident. Funded by Moscow, naturally. Come on, guys, when Firad-

zov took over, and was gunning for him, Haydor ran here to us for sanctuary."

Carl remembered. "Moscow has no use for Firadzov. They wanted the oil pumped north to Moscow, as in Soviet times, when they owned this dump. This guy Haydor was Moscow's man. Where is he now? Syria?"

Stanley thumped the table. "He's still here! One of our permanent lodgers. He lives in a couple of rooms in the annex. No one else will have him. Where can he go? The Arabs hate him even more than the Russkies, because they think he did a deal with us. Of course, Firadzov would kill Haydor if he got half a chance."

Charlotte said quietly, "We could do a trade. . . ."

The two men looked at each other. Then they both grinned.

Carl Roddard had himself driven to the offices of Butterfield-Chou-Wolff on the edge of town. Big initial letters BCW loomed on the façade of a square concrete building. It was ringed with a double protective fence. Nearby, the road led to a spot where the city abruptly stopped. A red-and-white painted metal pole was down. Beyond it, the great desert began, stony and drab. The barrier kept out various camels, who stood hopelessly, staring in at this outpost of civilization.

After thrusting his biometric card in the entry-slot to the building, Carl took the elevator to his offices on the fourth and top floor. It was blessedly cool in BCW, where the air-cond unit worked. His assistant, Ron Deeds, greeted him. Preoccupied, Carl went to study the map of the area on the far wall.

A silver marker pen depicted the pipeline running a thousand miles from East to West. It started just outside Ashkabad, to cross the frontier with Northern Iran at the town of Gifan. At the frontier was a fortified pumping station, marked as at Milestone 72.

Ron came over, looking serious, tousling further his untidy fair hair. "The BCW committee met this morning," he said in a low voice. "It's looking not good. The world is waiting for the opening of the pipeline next week. BCW don't want hitches. They were on the air to Washington and Beijing this morning, saying they would accede to Firadzov's demand for nationalization of the first stretch of pipeline. They will take over control. We'll just have a watching brief."

Carl scowled. "We can't let it happen. Look, Ron, we're going to do a trade. We think it will work. I need your help, okay?"

"Sure. What can I do?"

"We buy Firadzov off with a well-known dissident in our keeping. This nationalization idea is just a bluff. We'll call their bluff. We give Firadzov the dissident, he stops this nonsense. After all, Firadzov needs the oil flowing as much as we do."

"What do I do?"

Carl began wagging his finger as if counting. "One, we can't let anyone know the Embassy is involved in this deal. Two, we need you because you are British. Three, you drive around tonight and we have everything ready. Four, you take the dissident, whose hands will be tied and whose legs will be shackled, to the gates of the Interior Ministry. Tanks and major firepower will be there to protect you. Five, you speak over the intercom to

the Interior Minister offering him the deal. Call off this nationalization ploy immediately and you hand over the dissident they want like mad. Okay? Will you do it?"

Ron had begun to look dubious during this speech. "Very dicey. Who is this dissident guy anyway?"

"His name's Haydor, Ziviad Haydor."

Ron let out a whistling breath. "Him? Carl, you can't hand Haydor over to that bastard Firadzov! Haydor is a hero of the people. It was Haydor who represented the chance of a better life for everyone. Firadzov would torture him to death!"

"Look, Ron, Haydor is a spent force. That issue's closed, okay? It's worth one life to get the damned oil flowing, isn't it?"

Ron stuck his fists in his jeans and turned his back. "It's treachery, Carl. We swore to protect Haydor only a year ago. Sorry, I want no part of it."

Carl grabbed Ron's shoulder. "Can't you see what's involved? This is no time for scruples!"

"Take your hand off me," Ron said. "I can't do it."

"Fuck you! Then I'll do it myself!"

He did it himself. It worked. Carl Roddard was hooded as he handed over his prisoner to the Interior Ministry. Ziviad Haydor disappeared into the regime's torture chambers. Next morning, President Firadzov himself spoke on television. He stated, "Regrettably, an attempt was recently made by unreliable elements to seize control of the oil pipeline. We of course recognize the legitimacy of the present international construction company to operate the pipeline for the benefit of all concerned. I have personally supported this great international venture, which affirms the greatness and importance of our dear nation, Turkmenistan."

"Unreliable elements involved in this attempted illegal appropriation of property have been arrested, including the Minister for the Interior. They will stand trial at a future date."

Stanley Cogan and Mr. Freddie Go from the Chinese Embassy shook hands with Carl in a brief ceremony. After which they toasted each other in champagne.

"We must reward you somehow, Carl," said Freddie Go, his face crinkling in the friendliest of smiles.

"I didn't want anyone to adopt my baby," said Carl, thus mystifying his Chinese friend. "My marriage has collapsed, Freddie. Margie refused to live here in Ashkabad with me. She's in England now. I'm hoping to patch things up, now that the oil is at last about to run."

"Okay," said Stanley. "We'll charter you a special plane right into London Heathrow—with our best wishes."

Carl, smiling, shook his head. "A bigger favor even than that, Stan, and Freddie. I want to be the first guy ever to drive along the whole length of Suoyue, all the way to the Med."

"Do we let him?" Stanley asked Freddie.

Freddie pretended a sigh. "Can we stop him?"

Carl Roddard shook hands with his Chief Engineer in farewell before climbing into his car. Behind them lay the first pumping station and the

opening stretch of pipeline. The all-steel pipe had cathodic protection—the negative electric charge running throughout the length of the pipe. The pipeline and its associated roads stretched for over one thousand miles, covering some dangerous territory.

Carl left Ashkabad, the capital city of Turkmenistan, early that morning. He kept himself well-armed, and tucked a revolver into the auto's front compartment. The Pipeline Road began outside Ashkabad on its long journey westward. Carl had programmed his car accordingly, and was traveling at an average of ninety miles per hour.

With him in the car was Donna Khaddari. Donna had taken a Luck-istryke and was sitting quietly, smiling to herself. Carl's secretary was ill; she had sent her sister Donna instead. A pretty girl, thought Carl, approvingly. They had passed Gifan, where they crossed the frontier between Turkmenistan and Iran.

To the right of the speeding vehicle—to the north—the coast of the Caspian Sea was visible. Dead ships lay there aslant, stranded, beached for all time, bones merely of boats that had once sailed from Baku in Azerbaijan to Bandar-e Shah in Iran. Now the sea itself, whose waters had been siphoned off in the construction of the pipeline and its attendant highways, was wan, white, waveless, shrinking from its forsaken shore.

To the south of the highway, the Elburz Mountains rose, their rainy slopes thickly forested, except where new roads had cut fresh scars through the trees.

Carl, vacationing from his engagement to contractors Butterfield-Chou-Wolff, kept his eyes on the highway ahead. It curved little, it swerved little, it climbed on gentle inclines, only to dip again, always following beside the armor-plated oil pipeline. Where the pipeline went, monstrous, shining metal-black, there the road went. Where the road went, there sped Carl's auto, streamlined as a fish. And on the north side of the great pipe, there a twin road went, designed to carry traffic eastward.

At present, though, the twin routes were empty of traffic. The great highways were not yet officially open. Only Architects-in-Chief traveled them, together with a few military vehicles. Carl concentrated on recalling details of his conversation with Coordinator Mohamed Barrak before he left Ashkabad. He had voiced a complaint that the consortium to which he belonged was filling the pockets of the dictator, Firadzov.

He regarded Barrak as yet another corrupt native official, one of a kind with which BCW had become used to dealing. Barrak had grown distant and formal. He clasped his hands over his white jacket and his ample stomach. The vodka was getting to him.

He spoke of historic necessity. The need of the West to draw on Central Asian oil overrode other considerations. Yes, Firadzov was rather—shall we say, overbearing?—well, dictatorial; but he controlled a country that floated on oil, and those vast reservoirs were needed to sustain the greedy West. A West, Barrak might say, also dictatorial. When the oil was flowing, the West would no longer have need of oil from Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, such as Iraq and Kuwait.

Then Barrak had abruptly changed the subject, demanding to know why Carl Roddard suddenly needed leave to go to England.

"My ex-wife has moved to England from Savannah. She lives with her brother in Oxford. I need to see her again."

"You are planning to remarry?"

"That remains to be seen." None of your business. He disliked Barrak and his pompous manner. Barrak liked to speak of the pipeline as "this great engineering achievement," as if he had built it himself.

Carl Roddard had broad shoulders and a broad base. He sat hunched in a narrow chair, saying nothing. He was drinking vodka with Barrak in a more-or-less westernized tea house in the European quarter of Ashkabad. Although the Turkmen were Muslim, or faintly Muslim, their seventy years under Russian domination had taught them to drink vodka like Cossacks. Carl did not tell the other man he had two young sons wandering about somewhere in the Eastern United States, kicking up hell.

Barrak had not inquired why Carl wished to drive the length of the pipeline road instead of flying. Everyone involved in the grandiose project desired to drive the whole length of it one day. Perhaps even Barrak felt the itch.

The car sped ever on. Carl's great tanned face was immovable as he half-listened to a remastered ribbon of music from the long-dead Django, cool as a dingo in December. Donna appeared to be listening. She sat close to Carl, saying nothing.

He gazed at the landscape he had helped forge. The highway undulated over northbound rivers pouring down from the mountain slopes. It followed the great coffin of the oil pipeline, by far the strongest feature of the moribund natural scene. Haze overhead filtered sunlight down evenly, shadowlessly; as the distance-indicators flashed by; the scene resembled a computer playscene.

The pipeline would, in a sense, unite East and West. Yet it was Carl's absorption in the mighty project that had broken up his marriage to Margie. That could be put right, maybe. He would try. He regarded himself as a good fixer. Results were in the lap of the gods.

Gigantic yellow-painted Chinese constructors toiled along in parallel with the pipeline. They were preparing to build a third lane on the west-bound route. The great project was yet to be completed. High overhead, geostationary satellites saw to it that the project was not interfered with.

The auto map was signaling fifty miles to Amol-Babol when Donna said, "I need a coffee."

"Right behind you."

"No, I need to stretch my legs. I have long legs, you know."

"I have noticed."

"Stop at Amol-Babol, please, Carl."

Amol-Babol was the first stop after Ashkabad, the site of a big pumping station. As they had had to show their biometricards to enter the pipeline road, so they had to show their biometricards to get off it. The barriers swung up, the steel teeth sucked themselves down into the roadway and they drifted through.



After the auto was doused with germicidal wash, it parked itself and the couple were free to walk.

Amol-Babol was situated on the coast. Ships maneuvered in the overcrowded harbor. Tehran was no more than sixty miles away, south over the Elburz Mountains. Amol-Babol was a newly compounded city, a transitory refuge for many of the men and women of all nationalities who worked on the pipeline. They included American, Australian, French, Spanish, English, Kurdish, Japanese, and certainly Chinese. Many were soldiers, clerks, prostitutes, thieves, adventurers.

The chaos of Amol-Babol was preferable to the deadness of Firadzov-ruled Ashkabad.

At least Firadzov had cooperated with the constructors of the gigantic pipeline. The gross egotist he was regarded the pipeline as his memorial. He already had a pipeline, but it ran northward to Moscow, and Moscow paid peanuts compared with what the West would pay. Everything was a question of money.

A big transporter aircraft was thundering down on the Amol-Babol airport even now, bringing in more workers, more machinery.

The permanent civilian population consisted of a small clique of Iranian, Indian, and Chinese bureaucrats, sitting at the top of the pile, then mainly of Kurds and other Iranians, with a scattering of Afghans. These latter, the poor, had set up stalls and markets through which Carl and Donna now strolled. Here were the world's electronic gadgets, blinking, winking, chirruping, together with bright cheap Chinese-manufactured toys and clothes. Oriental music shrilly played. Donna bought a deep blue T-shirt bearing the elegantly complex Chinese symbol, Suoyue, for "Pipeline." At another stall they sat and drank a rich Sumatra coffee. No alcohol was permitted anywhere along the course of the pipeline; it was a condition on which the Chinese had insisted.

Carl took Donna to the Pipeline Consortium H.Q. in A-B Square, to say hello to his friend and colleague, Wang Feng Ling. Ling embraced Carl, kissed Donna's hand, and ordered tea to be brought. Ling as ever was neatly dressed in a well-tailored suit. His hair was immaculate. He wore a gold ring on one of his long artistic fingers. His smile was warm and sincere.

"How is life in Ashkabad, Carl, dear chap?" he asked. "Dear chap" was his favorite form of address.

"Dull as ever. Even the camels are bored."

"With that particular time-expired Central Asian dullness?" Ling smiled at the recollection.

"The new dictator is slightly better than the old dictator. Firadzov accepts bribes with a better grace. . . ."

Ling nodded his sympathy. "Unfortunately the new dictator in Uzbekistan is not slightly better than the old dictator, dear chap. However, we maintain long and tedious talks."

Carl gave a short laugh. "You still have hopes, then." He had learnt to talk obliquely to Ling.

Ling raised his cup and smiled at his friend. "Hopes? You mean plans? Certainly the Suoyue can be key to both East and West."

Indeed, even the Westerners on the pipeline road referred to it as the "Suoyue," the Chinese word for "Key." Westerners were interested only in piping the oil of Central Asia to the West, bypassing the Arab states; but the Chinese were major players here, and the Chinese had plans to extend the Suoyue eastward, beyond Turkmenistan to China itself.

As had always been the case, Chinese intentions were not clearly understood in the West.

"Any problems on your stretch of the pipe, Ling?"

"Your president, Julian Caesare, may cause problems, dear chap, if he continues to exacerbate Islamic problems in Iran."

"Well, the Consortium has a century's concession on this coastal strip."

"Religion always has contempt for any concession."

"You're right there."

As usual—thought Carl, shaking hands on leaving—Ling was so frequently right. Staunch nationalist though he was, he had begun to believe that the Chinese were actually a superior race. The superior race.

He did not say as much to Donna when they reentered the bazaar. Or when they climbed into their auto. Or when they were once again traveling on their way westward on the Suoyue. The great pipeline in its protective casing appeared to go on forever. Every so often, a pumping station straddled the pipe. Dominating the stations were small strongholds, bristling with masts and fully manned, fortified against those enemies of the West who would seek to block the flow of oil.

Carl remembered he had visited Hadrian's Wall in the North of England, stretching from East coast to West coast, where he studied how the Romans had attempted to keep out the barbarians. The Suoyue might bear a Chinese name, but the essential elements of its design lay in the West, and had their links with ancient Rome.

The Caspian fell away, leaving its lassitudes behind them. Climbing, they crossed the forty-ninth line of latitude. Kurd patrols were in evidence here, driving U.S. army vehicles with Kurdish flags attached to their aerials. The aerials whipped in the wind. The Kurds had been paid off; the patrol now fired their Kalashnikovs into the air by way of greeting to the speeding car.

The weather became colder and an inclement wind blew. Clouds were torn to shreds. The climate remained mild inside the auto. Carl and Donna sat close, elbows all but touching. Pilotless planes, controlled from Diyarbakir, screamed overhead, low to the ground. Higher overhead, they occasionally saw the heavyweight BWA, the Broad Wing Aircraft that also kept up a continuous patrol.

"It's like living in a sci-fi dream," Carl remarked to Donna.

They passed the ruins of a village that had been demolished to make way for the pipeline. Only a minaret remained standing, a sentinel to a vanished way of life.

As the landscape grew wilder, dusk became thicker. When night encompassed the solitary vehicle, Carl followed an old life-saving habit, lowered his seat, opaqued the windows and went to sleep.

Once he was soundly asleep, Donna deopaued the windows again to watch an electric storm over the mountains ahead. No thunder accompanied the flashes. Great sheets of lightning appeared and disappeared silently, ghosts of the stratosphere. Their reflected light ran off the sides of the pipeline armor like water spray.

She too slept, waking when the hitherto unnoticed tone of the auto changed. The car traveled on electromagnetic force; although it was without wheels, a new resonance suggested new conditions.

From the windows, Donna saw a glitter of water on both sides far below them. The sky had cleared. The night was now comparatively cloudless, and a crescent moon shone on the water. She woke Carl.

"Where are we? What's this?"

He glanced at the auto map to confirm his understanding.

"We're crossing Lake Urmia. It's a lovely spot, about forty miles wide in places. Lots of geese and water birds here."

"We're crossing on a bridge, are we?"

He heard the nervousness in her voice, and was surprised.

"Yes, we've just avoided a high mountain. I forget its name. Some people would say we were in the middle of nowhere."

"But I can see lights down below. A long way down there!" She was half-standing, to peer below the bridge.

"The people down there are also in the middle of nowhere, even if they don't realize it. There are quite a few islands in the lake. Relax, Donna!"

To calm her, he said, "I went fishing with Ling off one of the islands, once, in the early stages of construction. The supports of this bridge are founded on some of those islands. The people got paid for the disruption to their lives. They went and built a new mosque with the money, instead of a new hospital. They think like that."

"So we are still in Iran, or where?"

He was looking down at the village lights, small below, remembering the immense pike he and Ling had caught. They had spitted it, cooked it over their fire, and ate it. He remembered the taste of it.

"We're traveling a dramatic stretch of northern Iran. Some way to our north there's Azerbaijan and Armenia. It's earthquake country. The Suoyue runs on shock absorbers over this stretch."

Donna remarked that for once she could see the ribbon of the parallel road running eastward.

He said that the roads here were built on separate bridges for safety reasons.

She fell silent, perhaps awed by the magnitude of the engineering feat that had built Suoyue. Nor was she unaware of the years of political discussion, contrivance, and bribery that had gone into the groundwork before building started. The pipeline project had ruined her life and her family's. Only when China had signed on to play a major role in the construction had the consortium Butterfield-Chou-Wolff gained the financial incentive to function.

Her family had been one of those that lost out in the wheeler-dealing. Donna's father, Awal al-Khaddari, had lost his home and his business and had committed suicide. Donna had had to work for the negotiators

throughout the desperate years, and had gone to bed with some of them, in order to keep her family in bread.

The structure, despite furious Arab protests, was hailed as a great advance in world trade. It was touted as a unifying force, whatever had happened to Donna's and other families. Still the West remained worried about Chinese motives. Some things never changed.

The car was slowing. They were moving through dense forest. The replay on the auto map showed that they had passed along the northern frontiers of Iraq. Barriers protecting the pipeline road itself had gone down when they crossed the next national frontier. They were now about to enter Diyarbakir.

Turkey had become a member country of the European Community some years ago, despite its murky reputation regarding human rights. The feeling was inescapable that they were now in more friendly territory. Turkey was a secular state, despite its numerous Muslim inhabitants. So it had been since the day of Kemal Attaturk.

But at the feed road, when they slotted their biometricards into the gate computer, the gate did not open. Carl spoke over the phone.

"Please be patient. Please remain where you are," said a recorded message. "Your needs will be attended to as soon as possible."

"Oh shit," Carl exclaimed. "A certain lack of information there. . . ."

"There's a problem. . . ." Donna was increasingly nervous.

Above them, the armor-encased pipe ran into the base of a towering metal structure as big as an aircraft carrier. Diyarbakir was the last and largest pumping station before Suoyue ended its monstrous length at the new Turkish terminus port of Mersin.

Three police on armored motorbikes appeared, sirens screaming. They wore blue helmets. They halted on the other side of the gate and the lead police officer spoke over the barrier. Carl showed his identification.

The officer apologized with more formality than warmth.

"What's the problem?" Carl asked.

"A strike twenty-five kilometers from here, sir. The road's out."

"How's that?"

"Shell or mortar fire. Maybe nuclear. One of these Islamic terrorist groups."

"Bastards!"

The officer ignored the remark. He had other problems. "You have to wait here for a while."

"Take me to Chief of Suoyue Police, Tinkja Gabriel."

The mention of the Police Chief produced smart action. Carl and Donna were escorted immediately into the fortress. The very name of Tinkja Gabriel was a passport. Carl said to Donna, "I'll be a while with Tinkja. Can you keep yourself amused?"

"I'll try." She gave him a sly contemplative smile. Carl had once had a brief but passionate affair with Tinkja. Donna, he knew, had a cousin in Diyarbakir, working in the Logistics Division. Under all the militaristic activity of the project lay human affection, human relationships, human need.

They parted. Carl took an elevator to the police control tower. He was

stopped and body-searched before getting into the express elevator and when leaving it on the ninety-first floor—as if he could have made himself a bomb on the way up.

As he entered the great circular office, he saw Tinkja immediately, and drank in her appearance, her long dark hair swept back and knotted at the nape of her slender neck, her high-nosed hawkish profile. She was wearing a khaki uniform, looking severe, leaning slightly forward to speak into a microphone, despite the body mike dangling round her elegant neck. She saw him immediately. Her dark eyes flashed. She gestured toward her inner office. She went on talking.

The room was crowded. People at desks spoke quietly to their screens, machines clattered. On one wall was an electronic map of the entire Suoyue with its sweep of roads, from Ashkabad to Mersin on the north-eastern corner of the Mediterranean. LCDs indicated the whereabouts of items of traffic, of the pilotless strike planes and of the BWA drifting above the pipeline.

He waited in Tinkja's office. Tinkja was an Israeli of German-Romanian extraction, with royal blood on the Romanian side. Carl and she had met in France, when he was seconded to an EU architectural partnership. They had fallen in love and taken a brief—all too brief!—holiday in the Auvergne. Never had conversation, never had love-making, been sweeter. A time of unbelievable empathy. Never had he been so close to another human being. Carl allowed himself to recall those times as he looked about the room. It was in apple pie order. On one wall hung two framed lines of verse from a poem called "Gates of Damascus":

Postern of Fate, the Desert Gate, Disaster's Cavern, Fort of Fear,  
The Portal of Baghdad am I, the Doorway of Diyarbekir

He smiled to himself. He had once claimed that this was the only occasion Diyarbekir had been mentioned in English poetry. Evidently Tinkja had not forgotten.

From the window, the great forward organizations of the revolutionary Suoyue project could be seen. Miles of barracks and stores and yards and linking roads contained moving vehicles and personnel. A nearby services restaurant flew the flags of many nations. More distantly, a newly built railway linked the center with distant Angora, the Turkish capital.

Tinkja entered the room briskly. "Sometimes I could nuke Washington," she said. She spoke as if she had only just left the room and Carl Roddard.

By way of greeting, she went to Carl, shook his jacket roughly, clasped him, snapped a smile, and then turned away.

She stalked over to a speaker system and said, "Hospital Emergency Service. Ron Habland, report to me please. Ron Habland." Then she looked at Carl, arms folded across her chest, her tense expression relaxing only slightly.

"I hear the road has been blown," he said, in an equally no-nonsense way. "How did that happen?"

"We want to know who blew it," she said. "The strike occurred only at 13.05 hours. I have no time to stand here and chat, sorry. Washington is already bleating. Beijing will be next."

He glanced at his watchputer. It was 15.15. "Can I help?"

"Of course not." She said again, as if to herself, "We must know who blew it. There's no Arab nation that doesn't hate the Suoyue. Or it could be a local group of disaffected Turks, displaced by the pipeline. Or the damned Kurd dissidents. We have to know what we're up against."

Carl said, "We're up against most of the men in the Middle East. So, the road's already being rebuilt?"

"Whoever they were, they had possession of field nuclear weapons. Yeah, they're fixing your precious road."

An arbitrary tap at the door and a small man with well-greased hair, wearing green coveralls, came in. This was Ron Habland from the hospital emergency services. "Ron runs the morgue," she said in a brusque aside to Carl. She did not make an introduction.

Habland regarded Carl suspiciously. In fact, Carl had met Habland two years ago, in Ashkabad, but the man failed to recognize him, so tense was he. He bore the not unfamiliar air of those who thought that, in a region that had never known democracy, no one could be trusted.

Tinkja addressed the grim-faced newcomer. "Ron, you probably know already that one of our pilotless planes immediately strafed the terrorists. They were up in the hills, not a kilometer away. It's too bad. We needed at least one of them alive for questioning."

"Those planes are too damn efficient," said Ron. "We need troops on the ground. Even Spanish troops would do."

He pulled a face and turned a thumb down.

"I need you to get a contingent to go and collect up anything you can find of their bodies or parts of bodies. Toes, even. Legs. Heads. Clothing. Weapons. Support gear. The route they came from. Anything they dropped on the way. Go with the contingent."

"Glad to," said Ron, with a slight bow.

"Anything you can find. Back here soonest."

He said, "Once the oil starts to flow, the Arabs can go back to their lousy camels."

"My sentiments exactly." Tinkja gave Ron a grin as he departed, before she turned to switch over a TV screen.

"A bitter little man," she commented. "Lost a leg three years back, though you wouldn't think so to look at him."

"I'd think he was on the brink of a breakdown."

"Let's hope not today. . . ."

Looking over Tinkja's shoulder, Carl saw the scene at the damaged road, filmed from one of the satellites. A missile crater was surrounded by rubble and twisted metal for a distance of perhaps two miles. Wrecking and repair vehicles were already at work, clearing the site, re-laying foundations. The pipeline and its casing appeared to be unharmed.

"At least they missed the pipeline."

She said, "Yeah, that's what they would have aimed for. The shits probably believe that oil is already coming through. . . . Now I have to call Beijing. Sorry, Carl, I have no time for you. You better scram."

"Okay." He thought, She's glad to have an excuse. Of course she has another lover by now. She would never be without a man for long, not a



woman like this. He sighed. At least she had once been his. And he hers.

"Your road will be fixed soonest—open again maybe by eighteen hours. Not too much delay. 'Bye." She turned and began to make her Beijing call. Carl quit without saying good-bye.

It was 15.50. As Carl approached his auto, Donna emerged from a nearby archway, accompanied by a dark slender man in a worn grey suit. Carl was immediately alert at the sight of a stranger. This stranger, though seemingly young, had a deeply lined face. He wore a thin black moustache over thin lips.

Donna was neatly dressed and composed, although there was something about her body language Carl mistrusted.

He said as she approached, "You've heard about the strike on the road. Why do they hate us so much?" She made no answer to his remark.

"You look like shit. What's up, apart from the road?"

It was not the sort of comment she usually dared to make.

"Oh, the past—the past remains. Who's this with you?"

They were having one of their conversations. . . .

As she gave a half-smile, her teeth very white in her black face. "He doesn't have a name, Carl."

The thin man came close and stuck a gun in Carl's ribs.

Subdued Chinese music played somewhere in the background.

Carl delivered a swift knee to the man's testicles, but the man was alert, chopping the knee down. He gave a hard jab with his free hand to Carl's midriff, which winded him with pain. It was hard to credit that this was happening in the police precinct. A previous thought came back to him: in a region that had never known democracy, no one could be trusted. At some level there was police connivance involved here.

"Walk!" the thin man commanded.

As they went toward the side of the building, Carl looked about for CCTV. The nearest camera was plastered over with spray paint, still dripping. Then they were round the corner.

Still breathless, he asked Donna, "This is your cousin? What do you hope to get out of this?"

"Shut up and walk," she said.

The thin man punched Carl again. "You, fucker, you give Ziviad Haydor to the enemy, to your fucking friend Firadzov. Now you pay."

They were walking fast. It was hard to believe that this had happened in the police precinct.

Cops were everywhere, mainly men hurrying to get into wheeled cars. There was a crisis on the pipeline road. So the thin man and his prisoner slipped away. No one took any notice of them.

They reached a fast road crossing. On the other side, Carl was pushed into a tall building with an ancient crumbling façade. Sweet smell, not pleasant, greeted them inside. They started down a flight of steps, some rather broken. Carl turned suddenly, striking the thin man across the face with a violent blow.

The gun went off. The bullet whistled past Carl's ear. Donna chopped him across the neck with a sharp blow from the edge of her hand. He fell, and went tumbling down the remaining steps.



They were after him and on him. They hit and kicked him, cursing in their own language.

He was then frogmarched down a stone corridor. A side door was unlocked and he was kicked into darkness, so savagely that he sprawled on a damp and filthy floor. The door slammed behind him.

Carl lay there, groaning and breathing hard. After a while, he pulled himself up and leaned against a wall.

As his eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness, he saw there was a choked grey light filtering from a grating in the corner of the cell. Calming his breathing, he listened. Someone or something was breathing nearby.

He moved. The cell was larger than he had at first assumed. In the far corner, away from the light, a man was hanging.

Cautiously, Carl stepped nearer.

"Hello!"

There was no reply, but the man raised his head slightly.

Carl now saw that he was suspended by his wrists by ropes attached to steel rings set in the stone ceiling.

"How long have you been here like this?"

The answer came faintly in a foreign tongue.

"You poor bugger, hang on and I'll get you down."

In their rage and anxiety, Donna and her cousin had not searched him. He drew the knife from the sheath strapped to his lower leg and, reaching upward, sliced through the ropes.

He caught the body as it fell, to lower it gently to the floor. He knelt by it. He gently massaged the injured wrists.

Again the man muttered something.

As Carl sheathed his knife, he reassured the man as best he could. The poor fellow had been forced to relieve himself and stank.

An idea struck him. He peeled off his outer jacket and forced the injured man into it. Taking the man by his shoulders, he dragged him into the darkest corner and propped him sitting against the wall. He then stood waiting alertly by the two severed ropes.

The minutes crawled by. His resolution did not fail. When he heard footsteps in the corridor outside, he leapt up and seized the ropes in his two hands. As the cell door was opened, he hung his head as if unconscious.

It was the thin man, Donna's cousin, who had entered. He grunted as he took in the recumbent figure, before turning his attention to the hanging man. He came closer.

Carl threw himself on his captor. They fell together, the cousin striking his head on the floor. Carl slammed it again against the stone slabs. The cousin did not move.

With a quick look into the corridor, where a guard of some kind stood distantly, Carl dragged the unconscious man to a position under the grill in the wall. By standing on his chest, he could now gain leverage on the grill. Fragments of rust came away in his hands. He heaved and felt a slight movement.

"Rotten—like everything else in this damned place," he said to himself.

He pushed hard, and pushed again. One of the bars crumbled away. He rattled the grating. It gave. He heaved it to one side. Claspings the sides of the hole, he made a mighty effort and heaved himself up into daylight. Once he had an elbow on the ground, he knew he had made it.

Another struggle, kicks against the inner wall, and he was free.

Breathing heavily, he stood up, having to lean for a moment against an ivy-clad wall to look about him.

He was in a neglected courtyard. Brambles and other weeds sprouted from among flagstones. At one end of the courtyard was a wrought iron gate, through which uniformed men could be seen. Ducking low, Carl sprinted to the opposite wall. He clutched at a thick woody stem of ivy and hauled himself up. Beyond the wall was a busy street with shops, restaurants, and a cinema. Many men, the majority wearing robes, strolled about, indolent in the heat.

Carl dropped down onto the road, picked himself up and walked rapidly away. His plan was to enter a restaurant and there call Tinkja—until he realized he was covered in filth, picked up from the floor of the prison cell.

As he was walking rapidly to the end of the street, a taxi eased slowly beside him, a decrepit old vehicle with a turbaned Sikh at the wheel.

"Taxi, sah?"

He trusted no one in Dyarbekir, but there seemed nothing for it but to get in. Besides which, he liked and trusted Sikhs and their religion. He climbed into the back of the vehicle and told the man to take him to police H.Q.

"I will leave you by the gate, sah."

As he paid off the taxi driver in dollars, two black police cars came roaring from the yard and drove away down the road the taxi had taken.

He called Tinkja from reception. "I need a wash and some clothes."

She sounded surprised. "You are still in the dissident prison."

"No I'm not."

"I sent cars for you."

"I'm here in your reception area. How did you know about the prison anyway?"

She explained that she had planted a bug on him earlier, afraid he might meet with trouble. It was on his jacket, sticking like a burr. The jacket remained in the cell.

"I don't do this for everyone," she said. "But come on up."

Now the crisis on the wrecked highway was under control, the elegant Tinkja actually escorted him in his new clothes down to where his auto was parked. She blew him a kiss with her neat, leathery hand.

"Don't come back, Carl, okay?"

"You could say life is rather like a long long road," he said lightly, as he climbed into the car.

"Except you can repair a long long road," she said. Carl let her have the last word.

There were indications that the architect's car had been searched. A rear-view mirror had been deflected, a seat had been reoriented. The revolver was still in place. There was also an elusive scent, which Carl recognized as coming from a fingerprint spray.

It was all a safety precaution, part of the life they led. He thought nothing of it. Trust was not in it. Once he had fed in his biometric card, the car moved slowly along the feed road to the pipeline highway. Still it ran slowly. Power had been reduced. He was traveling at fifty m.p.h.

At about Denghuo (or Station) Thirty—lights blazing because there was a drab overcast—the helicopters started hovering. They were painted wasp-colored: Chinese Suoyue Military. The auto moved still more slowly. Intense activity ahead. Gathered around a fair-sized crater demolishing the stretch of the road were huge BCW excavators, construction units, cranes, concrete-sprouters, and other vehicles, among which wheeled cars moved like beetles. Emergency cabins had been erected. On a mountain to the south of this activity there was also movement. Tanks had been called in, plus a large number of military personnel in a variety of colored helmets.

Carl stopped the vehicle. He took binoculars from the front locker and was about to get out when the machine said, "Do not leave your vehicle, Carl Roddard!"

But he did leave it.

Barely had he raised the glasses to his eyes, than a siren sounded and an armored vehicle came howling up. A Chinese captain jumped from it before it had stopped and came at Carl in a run, leveled carbine aimed at him.

"Hold it!" said Carl. He half-raised his hands. "I'm Architect-in-Chief of this entire road, Dr. Carl Roddard."

The captain's hostility was not relaxed. Still pointing the weapon, he said, "I don't care who you are, sir, get back in your car!"

"Hey, I have every right to—"

"You have no right. Please get back in car fast!"

Increasingly angry, Carl said, "Lower your fucking gun, will you? I want to speak to your—"

"This is military area." He came close, prodding Carl with the muzzle of his gun. "Please return into your car fast and right now."

Carl did as he was told.

The captain became less confrontational. Staring down at Carl, he said, "Is radioactivity here. I want see your biometric details. Where is young lady you had earlier?"

"Locked up by now, I'd guess. Back in Dyarbekir."

Carl handed over his card for inspection. the captain scrutinized it for several seconds, before processing it through a hand-held checker. He nodded, handed it back. When he spoke again, his tone was more moderate.

"We have an accident here. The road is down. You must go by temporary road. You will follow this military vehicle along. Do not deviate." He indicated a car just behind his car.

"Follow? For how far?"

The captain managed a rictus of a smile. He slung his carbine over a shoulder. "Not too far. Do not attempt to deviate. Then you get back on the proper Suoyue road. Other people coming here we turn away. You officials are lucky."

"What, you mean lucky to be nearly fucking shot?"

"Get on your way, sir. Never lose your temper."

The captain nodded curtly, and returned to his vehicle. A second vehicle pulled out and signaled Carl should follow. A large red sign on its rear announced LEADER VEHICLE, just so there should be no mistake. Carl followed.

The leader vehicle led on to an improvised road, which skirted the disaster site in a wide bow. Carl watched guys in radiation suits climbing from the crater. No doubt they checked on the kind of missile that had been fired, on its composition and where it has been manufactured.

They had to halt. A signal was against them. The driver of the other vehicle came back and had a word with Carl, seeming curious about him.

Carl said to the newcomer, "We may be witnessing the beginning, not the end, of a crisis. This bunch of terrorists got themselves killed. You can bet others will come along."

"Just as well you're going on leave, then," replied the man.

"What do you know about that?"

"It's not only oil that travels along this here pipeline." He added that he had been told Carl would meet a reception when he arrived at the terminal in Mersin.

The Go signal came through.

It was a slow ride. Night was coming on. But once they left the site of the nuclear strike behind, the Leader Vehicle brought Carl back to the proper highway. The driver gave him a cheerful wave and departed back the way he had come.

Ordinary civilian police directed him onto the pipeline road. Once again he was speeding through Turkey westward. Now there were military patrol cars parked or bumping along beside the highway.

Carl stared out indifferently at the barren landscape. Beggars, ragged men and women, gesticulated to him or simply stood inert, some holding out begging bowls.

"Fat chance you've got!" Carl exclaimed. Yet Turkey had benefited greatly from joining the EU; of course, that would apply only to the big cities.

An ambulance was loading a prostrate woman and baby on a stretcher into the rear of the vehicle. Then he had flashed past. The tiny cameo of drama and fate was lost far behind. In no time, they were approaching a well-lit bridge. Together with the pipeline, they crossed the youthful River Firat, once known as the Euphrates.

In just over three hours, Carl's auto descended to Turkey's southern coastal plain. The waters of the Mediterranean appeared, flat, faintly gleaming. From here on to its terminus at Mersin, the great armored pipeline ran on reinforced stilts, and the two motorways, the eastbound and the westbound, ran together in parallel.

The newly constructed airport was at Mersin, on the outskirts of the growing city. This was where the great thousand-mile thrust of metal ended. Carl would soon be seeing his ex-wife again; that matter would certainly need some sorting out. Either she would see sense or she wouldn't.

Although it was midnight, Mersin was still extremely busy, preparing for the moment when the pumping station began operations and Central Asian oil began to pour into waiting Western tankers, to quench the inexhaustible Western thirst for oil and more oil.

He climbed from the car. He could see an Allied American plane gleaming under searchlights on the runway. The Stars & Stripes were flying. They were symbols of home. An official welcoming party clustered behind the barrier, waiting for him, holding flags and placards. One placard read, "LESSEPS WAS A PIKER COMPARED TO U." He felt only fatigue, not elation. He had had a job to do. Another job lay ahead.

As he approached the crowd, a woman called out shrilly, "Come back safe, Carl."

He gave her a grin. A nice-looking young woman.

She clutched his arm as he pushed by. Perhaps she sensed his skepticism. "Maybe things will be better when you return."

He grinned into her smiling face and said, "And by then, if I can quote a friend, 'The Arabs may be going back to their lousy camels.'" O

## THE FALLEN ANGELS' SONG

Dead angels,  
sleeping on our sides,  
the blackened stumps  
twitch idly in our sleep  
until we dream



then oars to well-oiled oarlocks gently fit,  
our wings return  
in long-poled pulls they beat,  
we lift and rise in widening spirals  
up the skies  
of near forgotten bliss,  
until we wake  
to the burned knobs'  
ache.



—William John Watkins

# THE COMPANY MAN

John Phillip Olsen

John Phillip Olsen is a California native who has lived in eastern France for the last thirty years. John loves learning languages. He has degrees in linguistics and English, and works in adult education, teaching English as a foreign language at a university language-training center. A 1998 Clarion West graduate, he credits his own living experience with providing him ample opportunity to study the "alien" that resides in each one of us. That expertise has been put to good use in "The Company Man"—his first sale, professional or otherwise.

**"D**o you like this picture, Mr. Soman?" Mr. Tsishh asked. The alien gestured toward a full-size colored print on the wall.

Kurt recognized the picture; it was *The Scream*, by the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch.

He turned back to look at his boss. The alien would have looked better in a Terran suit and tie, he thought. But Mr. Tsishh wore Hydrian garb, a light-colored robe that fit tightly over his sinuous reptilian body. The air held a faint odor of dust that reminded Kurt of snakes. He didn't like snakes much.

"I've always found it intriguing," Kurt said, trying to sound as if he knew something about art. He did have one painting at home on his living room wall, a long-ago gift from his friend Dan. It was a useful conversation piece with women visitors.

"Many of my people say it captures the Terran soul," Mr. Tsishh said in the distinctive Hydrian hiss.

Kurt steeled himself against the alien's stare. The president wore the dark glasses so popular among Hydrians posted to Terra. Behind the

lenses were two tiny black orbs and a terrifying look. Terrans said that the glasses were a conciliatory gesture, but Kurt knew better. He'd seen the president remove them for effect.

"Do you know other works of Munch's?" Mr. Tsishh asked.

"No," Kurt answered firmly. It wouldn't do to be timid, especially when he'd been so brusquely summoned that morning.

"This is a print, of course, but we intend to acquire the original. We have some new clients on Tsaxhotsis," the president said, using the Hydrian name for their native planet. He paused, then smiled.

"Who wish to buy Terran paintings?" Kurt ventured, and smiled back. A pitiful grin it must have looked, compared to the famous Hydrian smile. The middle of the reptilian lips didn't part. The pointed teeth showed, but not the darting tongue. Terrans said that their smile was another gesture, but Kurt knew mockery when he saw it.

"How should I proceed?" he asked.

"Handle everything yourself," the president hissed. "Quickly, and, if possible, discreetly. Do you expect any problems?"

"Only from those who'll want to keep Terran paintings on Terra," Kurt said. But he knew that the operation could be neither quick nor discreet.

"We only wish to buy some paintings," the president said, "not plunder Terra's artistic treasures. I'm sure you can handle the opposition."

The president rose from his desk. "There is one other thing, Mr. Soman."

"Yes?" Kurt asked. The president was coiling, ready to strike.

"Terra-Beta Hydri Exports has been very happy with you," Mr. Tsishh said as he removed his glasses. "So far."

Kurt stared back into the hard alien eyes.

"Your future with us depends on your success with this new mission."

And the president was gone.

Kurt stood alone in the top-floor office suite. He felt drained, but relieved. The bite hadn't been so bad. The new mission was all his, with perhaps a promotion in the offing.

There would be problems, though, he told himself as he took the elevator down to his own office far below. Selling films, recorded music, and pulp literature, his usual line, was one thing. Selling an artist's tangible creation was another. But he liked a good fight.

But why, he wondered, did the aliens suddenly want *paintings*?

Once in his office, Kurt phoned Joanna.

"How did it go?" she asked.

Kurt studied her face on his monitor before answering. She was clearly worried, but so lovely.

"Fine. I was there in plenty of time."

"It's a good thing I was around to get you out of bed."

"Dinner tonight?" Kurt asked. "We'll celebrate." They agreed to meet at the usual place for drinks.

Mr. Tsishh appeared on Kurt's monitor later that morning, bypassing both Kurt's secretary and assistant, and interrupting an on-line meeting. "We've sent you the file, Mr. Soman," he hissed. He smiled his Hydrian smile and was gone.



All of the desired paintings were by Munch. Kurt accessed an art encyclopedia and began to read. Edvard Munch, 1863–1944, precursor to the German expressionists, had had a long and productive career. Kurt next looked at an on-line gallery of the paintings the Hydrian wanted. Anguish, he thought as he clicked from painting to painting. Pure anguish. “The camera could never compete with a brush and canvas as long as it couldn’t be used in heaven and hell,” Munch had once written.

Kurt’s curiosity grew. From the monitor, the famous face of *The Scream* looked back and to one side of him. That poor being, who later appeared on key chains, coffee mugs, and knick-knacks of all kinds, what was he suffering from? What was he thinking? Something frightening, no doubt. A lot of frightening things were out there. In Munch’s day, as now.

Another painting caught his eye. *The Sick Child*, 1886, now in the Norwegian National Gallery. In thick dark tones, a young girl in her sickbed comforted her distraught mother. It made sense that the Hydrians would be attracted by a well-known painting such as *The Scream*, but why *this* one? Alien tastes had always leaned to the lighter side.

Kurt spent the afternoon on the net, reading up on the desired works and identifying their whereabouts. He contacted dealers in New York, Paris, and London for unofficial estimates, but did not as yet contact the owners. His plan was to wait; the inquiries alone would have an effect. Resistance would be fierce, but governments would bring pressure. Museums and private collectors would give in eventually. Terra needed Hydrian technology too badly. The operation would take longer, but the opposition would be minimized.

By evening, he was satisfied that his plan was in motion. With the contents of Tsishh’s file and his own net search downloaded into his mallette, he left the office. On his way out, he left instructions for his secretary to order a set of full-size colored prints of the selected paintings. And then he was off at a brisk pace for another night with his Joanna.

In the lobby, Kurt saw Leo Garth, the concierge.

“Good evening, Leo. What’s new?” Out of loyalty, Kurt made a point of being friendly with employees of Garth’s station, but it was good policy, too. Garth was intelligent and observant. Many times over the years, he’d given Kurt useful tips.

“Good evening, Mr. Soman,” Garth said in a mock-Hydrian hiss. “Nothing new at all, Mr. Soman.”

That was good news. The art project might still be a secret. Kurt knew that he had to be careful. If these new Hydrian clients were just whimsical collectors, he’d have no qualms at selling a few great paintings.

But what if it led to a buying craze? The ensuing resistance would be bad for business. And what was bad for business was bad for Kurt Soman. He had to be careful right here in the building, too. Some colleagues might be jealous of this opportunity.

And what if there was some deeper significance here? The aliens’ sudden interest in this expressionist painter was a mystery. Kurt didn’t like mysteries, not where the aliens were concerned. So he would study these paintings closely and get some answers before things went too far. He had too much at stake.

\* \* \*

"How do I look?" Joanna said, and did a full turn to show off her new suit, a Hydrian-inspired robe.

"Hmm," he said and kissed her. He thought it made her look rather box-like, actually. "I like what's underneath better."

Joanna sighed, then smiled. "Greg Ryder's joining us for a drink."

Greg. Why had she invited *him*?

"Only for a drink," Joanna added, and smiled again. She frowned though, when he ordered whiskey. He knew she wanted him to try a Hydrian alcohol.

"You shouldn't be that way about Hydrian things, Kurt."

"I like whiskey," he said. Joanna exasperated him sometimes. The true loyal employee. But she was young, she'd learn.

When Greg arrived, Joanna greeted him with a warm kiss on the cheek. Too warm, for Kurt. Joanna and Greg were old friends, he knew. They'd joined the company at the same time, hired by Kurt, had been promoted likewise, and were both buyers in other divisions now.

"So, what's new, Kurt?" Greg asked, after ordering the Hydrian alcohol. His nose twitched.

When Kurt saw Greg, he always thought of *shixis*, those giant rodents that the Hydrians imported and raised for meat. Looking oddly like rabbits, they hopped about like kangaroos and held their food in finger-like claws as they gnawed at it.

"Business as usual," Kurt said.

"New project?" Greg asked smiling.

Ooh, now *this* was unexpected! Kurt smiled, suppressing the urge to make it look Hydrian, but he said nothing. He'd let Greg do the talking. The boy didn't yet realize that the Hydrians raised guys like him for food.

"You don't look very happy, Kurt," Greg said.

"Kurt doesn't like our bosses anymore," Joanna said.

Kurt scowled.

"I'm only thinking of your own good," Joanna said. "*Inside* the company." She glanced at Greg.

"Kurt," Greg said, arms spread. "I'm your friend. You can tell me." He glanced at Joanna.

Again, Kurt only smiled.

"Has to do with paintings, doesn't it?" Greg said.

So, the news was out. Garth was sleeping on the job. Kurt laughed to hide his anger. If Greg knew, then Joanna did too. It was time to find out more.

He opened his mallette and accessed the project file. *The Vampire* appeared on the screen, an oil on canvas from 1893, now in the Munch Museum in Oslo. In contrasting red, beige, and dark greens, a weary man sought refuge in the arms of a woman, his head against her breast. The woman seemed to be peacefully kissing the back of his neck.

"Edvard Munch," said Joanna. "He painted *The Scream*."

"What do you make of this?" Kurt asked. He had read up on the painting that afternoon.

"Now *this* is interesting," Greg said. "The snake must be considering a whole new line."

Kurt hid his amusement at Greg's use of the derogatory term for a Hydrian. But the kid sounded spontaneous, and he didn't seem to know much. He'd been fishing for confirmation. That was a relief.

"We should have thought of it before," Greg went on. "We could be pulling ourselves up faster."

"If we even should sell off great works of art," Kurt said, hoping for a response.

"If you don't do it, someone else will," Greg said.

Realistic enough. Maybe he shouldn't be so suspicious. Greg was just an eager, ambitious, young exec, as Kurt himself once had been.

"What do you think, Kurt?" Joanna asked. Again, she glanced at Greg.

"There's something strange about these paintings," Kurt said, gazing at the mallette screen. The woman's rust-colored hair flowed down over her shoulders and the man's head, like streams of blood. "What can the Hydrians want with them?"

What was it that Tsishh had said of *The Scream*? That it captured the Terran soul? At least they considered the Terrans to have souls. A comforting thought. But why should they even care? For all their presence on Terra, the aliens remained aloof, holed-up in their compounds. As far as Kurt knew, no Terran had ever visited their home planet.

"It shows that they appreciate our culture," Joanna said. "We aren't just a market for their technology."

"I think it shows more than that," Kurt said, immediately regretting it.

"What's that?" Greg asked.

Kurt looked about the bar. A mixed Terran and Hydrian party were heading for a neighboring table. "We shouldn't be talking about it here," he murmured. But he wouldn't be talking about it with Greg again, anywhere. He'd found out what he wanted to know.

"Anyway, Kurt," Greg said as he stood to leave, "if you need any help, just let me know." He glanced at Joanna again.

Kurt smiled.

As they left the bar, Joanna looked glum.

"You shouldn't have told Greg that Mr. Tsishh intends to export famous paintings," she said. "A man in your position should be more discreet."

"Did I tell him that, dear?" Kurt asked.

"Well, is it true?"

"You're curious tonight," Kurt teased. "And you and Greg already know a lot that I didn't tell you."

Joanna blushed, but then looked irritated.

Kurt didn't want a fight. He had something more pleasurable in mind. He let Joanna steer him to a Hydrian restaurant she'd heard of. The food was good—a dish of raw *shixi*, thinly sliced and marinated in different sauces. He tried not to think of it as rodent. Joanna became cheerful again, and, after dinner, Kurt even ordered a glass of that Hydrian alcohol. It, too, was surprisingly good, fiery and tasting faintly of cinnamon.

"What do you think of that painting you showed us?" Joanna asked as they sipped their drinks.

"I see a sad man seeking solace," Kurt said solemnly, trying his best to

remember what he'd read about *The Vampire* that afternoon. He spoke slowly, trying to make the words sound like his own. "He lays his hand on a woman's breast. He feels his own heart beating, fiery lips touch his neck, desire ripples through him. He feels his blood escaping."

"All that, just from a painting?" Joanna asked.

"No," Kurt confessed, and laughed. "That's what Munch wrote about it. But I see what he means. I like it."

"You're not going to get sentimental, are you?"

"No, but I'd like to know why the Hydrians want these paintings. And admit it. It'll be a shame to sell unique works. They've taken a lot from us already."

Joanna looked worried.

They made a good pair, he and Joanna, Kurt thought. She had talents he lacked. They got along well, and their love-making was great. He had never had a stable relationship before. Maybe now was the time.

"Joanna, will you marry me?" Kurt asked.

Joanna smiled. She looked surprised, but not displeased. She took his hand. "You *should* get married, Kurt, at your age. But not me. Not yet."

*At his age.* The words sliced through him. Is that how she saw him? Too old for her? He looked away, his face burning. When he looked back into her eyes, she looked sad. They finished their drinks in silence, and Kurt called for a company car.

On their way home, Joanna snuggled up to him. She whispered how nice it was to be with him. He would take her to his place for the night, wouldn't he? And later, in bed, she was her usual passionate self. As he lay tightly against her afterward, Kurt felt her softly nibbling at his neck. A nibble that became a soft bite.

The rebuff hit him again late the next afternoon. Kurt had spent the day on routine business and then checked his mail for answers from art dealers. Nothing of interest had come. It was still too soon. Then, when he called Joanna, she told him she was busy that night.

It was just as well, he told himself. He would get some work done, look into the Munch paintings in greater detail. A quiet evening at home would do him good, *at his age*. The set of prints he had ordered were waiting for him in a flat plastic carrying case. With that in one hand and his mallette in the other, he left the building.

He decided that he would walk home. It would only take about fifteen minutes. *At his age*, the exercise would do him good. Oh, stop it! said a voice from nowhere. You're not done-for yet! He laughed at himself.

He crossed the street and walked along the embankment promenade. A brisk wind blew in from the river and the not-too-distant sea. The rounded forms of the alien architecture in the Concession soon gave way to the outskirts of the Terran city. His building came into view, a bright residential tower for upper-level company employees that stood a short way beyond the Concession boundary, near an underground station.

As Kurt walked, he recalled Munch's account of how the inspiration for *The Scream* came to him.

\* \* \*

"I was walking along the road with two friends. The sun was setting. I felt a breath of melancholy. Suddenly the sky turned blood-red. I stopped, and leaned against the railing, deathly tired—looking out across the flaming clouds that hung like blood and a sword over the blue-black fjord and town. My friends walked on—I stood there trembling with fear. And I sensed a great infinite scream pass through nature. It seemed to me that I could hear the scream. I painted this picture; painted the clouds as real blood. The colors screamed."

A breath of melancholy, Kurt thought. A breath of melancholy.

Near the underground station, the crowd thickened. On the sidewalks, the homeless settled in for the night. Kurt thought of *Workers Returning Home*, another of the Munch paintings he had viewed. Dark-eyed figures in working blues trudging along the street, like these black-clad men and women leaving the factories that bordered the Concession.

The apartment seemed empty without Joanna. He took off his jacket, tie, and shoes, and poured himself a whiskey, his oldest and finest. He put on some music, and was about to settle on the sofa when he remembered the prints. He quickly hung them on the wall, in no particular order. One caught his eye immediately.

It was *Melancholy*, one of Munch's masterpieces. On a desolate beach, a man in black contemplated the rocks along a shoreline of pale blue water. In the distance, another man and a woman, accompanied by an oarsman, headed toward a moored boat. What was the dark man thinking? Dark thoughts probably. That the woman—his loved one, no doubt—was leaving with another man?

Where was Joanna tonight? Those glances between her and Greg in the bar. Greg sitting there drooling at the idea of selling Terran art. Drooling over Joanna, too? But no, she'd never be attracted by an underling. He couldn't even call for a company car!

On another wall was *Two Women*, by Kurt's friend Dan. In subdued reds and yellows, faces and hands ivory white, two figures emerged from shadows. Kurt had often thought it was only one woman, the second figure simply a ghost. Or the real woman hidden within the first. Which was real? Did he know the real Joanna?

He took a sip of his whiskey. That dusty odor touched his nostrils. He smelled his fingers, his shirt—There it was. He stripped, and showered and then put on the light-colored bathrobe Joanna had given him.

But he wasn't getting any work done. He still didn't understand why the aliens wanted these paintings. Could Dan be of help? His old friend had been a promising artist once. Kurt hadn't seen him in years, but he could call now, or even better, send a message.

That done, he sat back and closed his eyes, tried to listen to the music. But there was something else he should do. On his mallette, he accessed his bank account and verified the month's transfer to his parents. He quickly ordered an additional transfer of an equivalent sum.

Dan's answer came an hour later.

Kurt, Good to hear from you. How's life? Difficult, from the sound of it. The snakes want Munchs now, do they? I've suspected for years they'd start

taking works of art. Why? Because they'll end up taking everything. Why Munch? No idea. You tell me. You know them better than I do. If I were you, I wouldn't go through with this. But let me know if you need any help.

Don't go through with this? That was easy to say. He *had* to go through with it. If he didn't, someone else would.

Kurt sat back, whiskey in hand, and gazed at the prints. Every anguished face seemed to look back.

Kurt saw Garth in the lobby first thing the next morning.

The concierge eyed the case full of Munch prints Kurt was carrying, then looked about to make sure no one could hear.

"Things may be different in the future, Mr. Soman," he said. "It's a good time to be careful." But he would say no more.

In his office, Kurt put the Munch prints on the wall and then checked his mail. There was news. The outcry over his inquiries had been brutal. The idea that the current owners would part with the works was scoffed at by many. But privately, some interest was shown. The rumor mill was hard at work, which was just what Kurt wanted. It would soon be time to make offers.

Early that afternoon, Mr. Tsishh abruptly appeared on Kurt's monitor.

"What of your progress, Mr. Soman?" he hissed. His Hydrian smile was more open than usual. The tip of his tongue showed.

Kurt confidently brought him up to date.

"You've made no offers yet?" the president hissed. He removed his glasses. "I told you we wanted a rapid conclusion to this operation, Mr. Soman. A *rapid* conclusion." And the president was gone.

Kurt was stunned. He had things well in hand. What was Tsishh's problem? The silence in his office was broken by that voice from nowhere again. It rose around him, a harsh whisper of fear and injustice.

The Munch project tormented him the rest of the afternoon. After his contact with Dan, he had tried researching Hydrian civilization, but it proved difficult. His net search revealed thousands of sources—photos, maps, seemingly thoughtful pieces, all familiar, but devoid of analysis and substance. What dark secret were the aliens hiding?

He called Joanna. He hadn't seen her for two days.

"Dinner tonight?"

She looked irritated. "I don't know if I should be seen with you," she finally said. "It's this project of yours. Word gets around, you know."

"Joanna, let's get together and discuss this situation." They agreed to meet at the usual place.

"*People* talk, Joanna," Kurt muttered once he had signed off. "Not the snakes."

Kurt found both Greg and Joanna waiting for him.

"I'd like to speak to Joanna alone," Kurt said.

"Sorry, Kurt, uh—" Greg began, his nose twitching. The boy looked like some nervous rabbit seeking a few scattered seeds. "I didn't mean to—"

"Kurt," Joanna said. "We'd like to talk about work."



"How's the Munch project coming?" Greg said.

"Why do you ask?" Kurt said. He wouldn't show his anger, but he'd skin this bunny alive if he had to.

"Word is going around that you aren't making progress," Joanna said, exasperated.

"Oh?" said Kurt. He waited.

Greg and Joanna exchanged glances. Joanna looked as though she didn't know what to do next, quite unusual for her. Greg was anxious to speak, though.

"Tsishh called me up to his office this afternoon," Greg said, barely hiding his satisfaction. "The snake wants results, Kurt."

"You think I'm not getting any?" Kurt asked. Again, he waited. Tsishh would never have met with Greg. Or would he? The president's behavior that afternoon had been surprising. And hadn't Garth warned him?

"You know where this'll lead if you don't get the job done?" Greg said, shaking a finger at him. "To the slums, Kurt! To ruin! And you could take your friends down with you."

"Why are you talking to Tsishh about my work?" Kurt asked calmly. And don't you tell *me* about the slums, boy, he wanted to add.

"Kurt, will you please listen?" Joanna said.

Greg's face was turning pink, his voice rising. "If you can't handle the job, let someone else do it!"

"You, for instance?" Kurt said, feeling relieved. Greg was a fool.

Greg looked furious. "You want to protect Terran art, don't you?" he sneered. "You told Joanna that the Hydrians had already taken too much!"

"Greg!" Joanna gasped.

Greg's words hit Kurt like flak. Everywhere at once. A crevice seemed to open beneath him, leaving him with one foot on either side. But he knew which one to pull back. He forced down the hurt and anger; he'd deal with his feelings for Joanna later. Right now, his job might be at stake.

He looked at Joanna. But it wasn't the Joanna he knew. An unknown Joanna, hard and brutal, had taken her place. "What else have you told him?"

She looked back, defiant.

But Kurt didn't let up. He stared into those eyes, trying to remember what else he might have said. What innocent remark, what piece of information casually shared, might now come slicing through the air like a boomerang?

Joanna turned to Greg. "Let's go," she said. Greg followed her without looking back. At the door, they exchanged a few words that Kurt couldn't hear. As they walked out, she put her hand in Greg's.

Kurt ordered a whiskey, sat back in his chair, and slowly sipped. This shouldn't hurt, he thought, but it did. He'd been stupid to be with a woman like Joanna. A man *his* age.

He opened his mallette and accessed the Munch file. *Self Portrait with a Wine Bottle* appeared. A red-faced Munch, glum and alone, sat at a café table, a bottle and a glass before him. Contemplating his destiny, perhaps? Kurt thought that he should be contemplating his own destiny just then.

He was beginning to like Edvard Munch.

\* \* \*

It was time to make an offer. One painting to begin with, the most famous. Refusal would provoke a crisis that could only be solved to the company's satisfaction, but acceptance would compromise Terran authorities. Either way, the company would win. And so would he, Kurt thought with some regret. He did have qualms. But he couldn't stop now. And, after all, it was only a few paintings.

He contacted the Munch Museum and also sent a message to the Norwegian government. The answer came within a few hours. The deal was finalized with a minimum of fuss, though some virulent articles appeared on the net. The price, means of payment, delivery date, and transport details were agreed. *The Scream* would be shipped immediately.

But Kurt made no move to acquire the other paintings. Not yet.

"Traitors," Garth grumbled to Kurt in the lobby one morning, "are everywhere." The concierge walked off mumbling into his transceiver, something about paintings.

In his office, Kurt had just enough time to put up the prints again when the override signal sounded on his monitor. Mr. Tsishh exploded onto the screen.

"You're behind schedule with this first list, Mr. Soman," the president said, making no attempt to smile. His pointed teeth glistened. He wore no glasses.

First list? Kurt had indeed heard "first list." The buying craze he had feared now loomed. He quickly informed Mr. Tsishh of his progress.

"Your colleague, Mr. Ryder, has offered his help on this project, Mr. Soman."

"He told me you brought it up with him."

"He brought it up with me, Mr. Soman."

"I thought so, Mr. Tsishh."

"Proceed quickly, Mr. Soman. I've sent you another file." The alien disappeared.

"Damn him!" Kurt hissed as he read the new list: Delacroix, Gauguin, Picasso, Van Gogh, and Warhol. A frantic net search told him that the list was a mixture of periods and schools, all of the works highly prized. So much for any deeper significance.

"No plunder of Terran artistic treasures," Kurt muttered. The liar. Damn the company! Damn the snakes!

That dusty odor of snakes hit him in wave after wave. He gagged, regained control of himself, and ripped off his shirt and tie. The odor was still there. His stomach spasmed. He steadied himself on the edge of his desk.

Take hold, Kurt, he told himself.

From the wall *Self-Portrait with a Burning Cigarette* looked down. The artist's eyes struck him. Munch had been strong, for sure. Anguished and emotionally erratic, but strong. Be strong, Kurt.

He would need a new plan now.

*The Scream* belonged to the company. One afternoon, in the presence of his staff and an employee from Security, Kurt supervised the delivery of the specially designed transport crate. He himself punched in the combinations to unlock it. He alone in the company had the codes.

The painting was exposed. That face, now so familiar, was magnificent. Was the figure holding up his hands in surprise? In fear? Was he covering his ears? Who were those people following him?

Alone with the masterpiece in his inner office, Kurt acted quickly. He removed the painting from its frame and placed it in the carrying case he'd been using for the prints. The empty frame and the prints he then put into the transport crate. Ten prints in exchange for one original. That seemed fair enough, given the circumstances.

The last print to come off the wall had become Kurt's favorite: *Self-Portrait between the Clock and the Bed*. The aged Munch stood erect before a grandfather clock that showed no hour. A bed awaited him, with a red, white, and black cover. Munch's funeral bier? And behind him, a door open to the dark.

Kurt loved this artist, this man long dead.

In a few minutes, Kurt would leave the building. He would be carrying the same case he'd been seen with every day for over a week. Once out of the Concession, he would take the underground to Dan's place. Dan had arranged to hide the painting.

Then Kurt would disappear into the slums. He had already made his final bank transfers to his parents and to other hidden accounts. He could live off his savings for a time, and, one day, he might find a way to make a living, if the police didn't catch him first. And he would wait for better times. He knew he couldn't stop Tsishh, but, in some small way, he would have accomplished something.

Mr. Tsishh appeared on the screen just as Kurt was making his final preparations. He wore his glasses, but no Hydrian smile.

"*The Scream* has arrived, Mr. Soman."

"I was just about to call you," Kurt said. "I'll bring it up personally tomorrow morning."

"Bring it up now," said the president.

Now. The word rang in Kurt's ears.

"Very well, Mr. Tsishh," Kurt said and smiled, hoping he'd hidden his surprise and fear.

The Hydrian smiled and disappeared.

Now. This was not in the plan.

He would have to improvise. And quickly. He had made arrangements for Security to store the crate and its contents in the basement vault for the night. That could be changed easily. The rest would be more difficult.

Kurt locked the crate and waited. When the men from Security arrived, he instructed them to deliver *The Scream* to Tsishh's office. The president was waiting for him, he told them, but Kurt had some phone calls to make first. Could they tell Tsishh's staff that Mr. Soman would be there as soon as possible? He thanked the men as they left.

Kurt called for a car and cast one last look around his office to make sure nothing was amiss. The "you've got a call" message was flashing on his monitor. Should he answer? It might be Tsishh again.

Joanna appeared. She must have heard about *The Scream*. She would be thinking that he was in for a promotion. If she only knew!

"Congratulations, Kurt," she said softly.

"Thanks," he said. Joanna would be calculating how she could gain the most from the new situation, of course.

"I'm sorry for everything that's happened," she said. "I hope there are no ill feelings. Can we still be friends?"

"I'm sorry too, Joanna." Kurt forced a smile. Better not let on what he really felt. Next, she would probably say that business was just business.

"It was only business," she went on, and tried to smile.

"Let's just drop it, Joanna. We're friends again, okay? Business friends." She looked perplexed as he signed off.

Kurt gathered up the case and his mallette.

Garth was in the lobby, mumbling into his transceiver.

"Any message for me, Garth?" Kurt asked. "I expect to hear from Mr. Tsishh."

"No, Mr. Soman," Garth said, faintly bitter. He warily eyed the carrying case. "By the way, Mr. Soman," he added, his voice softer, "congratulations." He smiled.

Kurt hurried on.

They saw him first. Greg and Joanna, arm in arm, were also about to leave the building.

"Hello, Kurt," Joanna said.

Kurt said nothing. First a phone call, and now this "chance" meeting. Yes, that was like Joanna. But she and Greg couldn't know what he was planning. Only Dan knew.

"Oh, Kurt, have you got a car coming?" she asked. "Could you drop us off?"

Drop them off? How would he get out of this without arousing suspicion? And Joanna, she really knew no bounds. But they were "friends" again, weren't they?

"Kurt, is anything wrong?" Joanna asked.

"No problem," Kurt said slowly.

"Working late?" Greg said, finally acknowledging him.

"Yes," Kurt said, leading the way out. In the building turnabout, the black limousine waited, its engine idling. The driver stood by, holding the door open. "You too, Greg?"

"As you can see."

Kurt stood aside to let Greg and Joanna into the car first.

"What have you got in that case, Kurt?" Greg asked, eyeing it.

The case. The damned carrying case. He should have gone out a side entrance and walked out of the Concession. It wasn't too late. He could say he had forgotten something, that they should take the car and then send it back for him.

Movement at the building entrance caught Kurt's eye. Garth appeared, one hand raised in his direction. A message from Tsishh no doubt. He should go, use Garth as an excuse to get away.

"Taking up painting?" Greg added, smirking.

Kurt looked at Greg sharply. This was no time to spar, but Greg had just pushed a button.

Joanna intervened. "Listen, you two—"

Kurt turned on Joanna. *You two*, she had said. Two little words that bit like fangs. *You two*. No blame on her part.

Joanna looked suddenly confused and afraid. "Kurt?"

"Mr. Soman," Garth said, close now, one hand on his transceiver. "An urgent message for you, Mr. Soman, from—uh, may I see you alone."

Kurt looked at Greg. The boy was no longer smirking, but that was not a look of confusion on his face.

"What *do* you have in that case, Kurt?" Greg demanded.

Kurt set down both case and mallette. He took aim. His blow, swift and hard—with all the fury of pent-up hurt and anger—went deep into Greg's stomach. The kid was young, but his abdominal muscles were soft.

Greg doubled over, mouth open. He held his midriff and looked as if he might vomit.

"Kurt!" Joanna screamed. "Don't—"

Kurt turned on Joanna again. "Don't get sentimental," he yelled. "You should be worried about his future in the company."

Joanna stepped back, frightened. The driver moved closer to her, looked on nervously.

"Mr. Soman," Garth said. "May I be of assistance?"

"One moment," Kurt said. "As soon as I've seen to Mr. Ryder." A glance at Garth, an instant's inattention—

Greg's fist caught him in one eye. The knuckles went deep into the socket.

Kurt staggered, but didn't fall. He put one hand to his eye. Blood began to run down his cheek.

"Gentlemen, please!" said Garth.

"Stop it!" Joanna screamed.

Kurt pushed both Garth and the driver aside. "Get in the car!" he screamed at Joanna. He grabbed Greg by the arm, shoved him violently against her. Their heads collided with a crack, momentarily stunning them. Kurt shoved again. And again. Their arms and legs tangled, Greg and Joanna fell, sprawling, into the back seat.

"Sorry for everything that's happened," he cried. "No ill feelings, I hope." He slammed the door. "Get them out of here!" he yelled to the driver.

The driver ran. He jumped behind the steering wheel, as if afraid Kurt would attack him next. The car sped away, tires screeching.

"Mr. Soman?" Garth said.

"Let me get cleaned up first."

"I'll make sure they understand."

Alone before the building, Kurt felt his heart pounding. He held a handkerchief to his wounded eye, felt the blood escaping. The carrying case and mallette were at his feet unharmed. He picked them up and, still holding the handkerchief to his eye, clumsily crossed the boulevard to the embankment promenade.

He sat on the parapet and turned to face the river. A cool breeze blew in off the blue-black water. It felt good on his throbbing face. His heart slowed, his vision cleared. He remembered *Self-Portrait with a Black Eye*, that Munch had painted after a fistfight with fellow painter Karsten,

over some woman. Even wounded, pride showed in Munch's pose. Not like Kurt now. A sorry sight he must be. Like some sick child. But this sick child had no comfort to give.

All was not yet lost. Garth would buy time for him. Tsishh would be livid, but might wait before calling the police. The underground station wasn't far. Once on a train, he would be reasonably safe.

Kurt set off quickly along the promenade, the setting sun to his back. Before him, the clouds turned gold in the sudden rays of light. He looked behind him. The sky was stained red and orange. Two dark figures were walking along, but, at this distance, Kurt couldn't tell if they were men or women. They stopped as he looked at them.

He hurried on. Some distance before him two new figures appeared, their silhouettes blurry in the evening light. Terrans or Hydrians? Kurt couldn't tell. One of them was leaning on the parapet. The other looked in his direction, arms crossed.

He stopped again, feeling tired enough to die. If he were arrested now, he would be a laughable figure. Some sentimental Terran futilely trying to protect an artistic treasure, caught in a pathetic attempt to escape. He could throw the case into the river. It would be carried away by the current in no time, and soon sink. The end of a great work by a great artist. Would that be better than giving it to the aliens?

Kurt looked about. The two people behind him, a man and a woman, he now realized, had stopped again. The woman turned to face the river. The man stood behind her and put his arms around her. Did he love her? Kurt wondered. What was love? A heaven and hell that no camera could capture. One day, that man might see his love leaving, walking out to a yellow boat, or out the door of a bar, hand in hand with her new love.

A voice seemed to speak to him then. You don't have time to sit here thinking dark thoughts, it said. Stop wallowing in melancholy! Go now, or they'll catch you. They'll take the painting, they'll capture your soul. *Our* soul.

Kurt picked up the case and his mallette and ran. The promenade was nearly deserted now. New rays of light shone down in screaming colors.

And he was out of the Concession.

The underground was only steps away. The crowd jostled him, brushing against the case he gripped so tightly. No smell of snakes in this tired, shuffling crowd.

The station entrance was before him now, a stairway and a door. Down into the dark he went, into the distant sound of underground trains and the scent of humanity in drafty corridors.

And the crowd of workers returning home closed around him. ○

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# SECOND PERSON, PRESENT TENSE

Daryl Gregory

Daryl Gregory is a 1988 graduate of Clarion whose stories have appeared in *F&SF*, *Amazing*, and elsewhere. He lives in State College, Pennsylvania, where he builds web applications for a software company in the morning and writes fiction in coffee shops in the afternoon. His wife is a professor and psychologist, but he tells us she bears no resemblance to the therapist in his first tale for *Asimov's*.

*If you think, "I breathe," the "I" is extra. There is no you to say "I." What we call "I" is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale or when we exhale.*

—Shun Ryu Suzuki

*I used to think the brain was the most important organ in the body, until I realized who was telling me that.*

—Emo Phillips

**W**hen I enter the office, Dr. S is leaning against the desk, talking earnestly to the dead girl's parents. He isn't happy, but when he looks up he puts on a smile for me. "And here she is," he says, like a game show

host revealing the grand prize. The people in the chairs turn, and Dr. Subramaniam gives me a private, encouraging wink.

The father stands first, a blotchy, square-faced man with a tight belly he carries like a basketball. As in our previous visits, he is almost frowning, struggling to match his face to his emotions. The mother, though, has already been crying, and her face is wide open: joy, fear, hope, relief. It's way over the top.

"Oh, Therese," she says. "Are you ready to come home?"

Their daughter was named Therese. She died of an overdose almost two years ago, and since then Mitch and Alice Klass have visited this hospital dozens of times, looking for her. They desperately want me to be their daughter, and so in their heads I already am.

My hand is still on the door handle. "Do I have a choice?" On paper I'm only seventeen years old. I have no money, no credit cards, no job, no car. I own only a handful of clothes. And Robierto, the burliest orderly on the ward, is in the hallway behind me, blocking my escape.

Therese's mother seems to stop breathing for a moment. She's a slim, narrow-boned woman who seems tall until she stands next to anyone. Mitch raises a hand to her shoulder, then drops it.

As usual, whenever Alice and Mitch come to visit, I feel like I've walked into the middle of a soap opera and no one's given me my lines. I look directly at Dr. S, and his face is frozen into that professional smile. Several times over the past year he's convinced them to let me stay longer, but they're not listening anymore. They're my legal guardians, and they have Other Plans. Dr. S looks away from me, rubs the side of his nose.

"That's what I thought," I say.

The father scowls. The mother bursts into fresh tears, and she cries all the way out of the building. Dr. Subramaniam watches from the entrance as we drive away, his hands in his pockets. I've never been so angry with him in my life—all two years of it.

The name of the drug is Zen, or Zombie, or just Z. Thanks to Dr. S I have a pretty good idea of how it killed Therese.

"Flick your eyes to the left," he told me one afternoon. "Now glance to the right. Did you see the room blur as your eyes moved?" He waited until I did it again. "No blur. No one sees it."

This is the kind of thing that gets brain doctors hot and bothered. Not only could no one see the blur, their brains edited it out completely. Skipped over it—left view, then right view, with nothing between—then fiddled with the person's time sense so that it didn't even *seem* missing.

The scientists figured out that the brain was editing out shit all the time. They wired up patients and told them to lift one of their fingers, move it any time they wanted. Each time, the brain started the signal traveling toward the finger up to 120 milliseconds *before* the patient consciously decided to move it. Dr. S said you could see the brain warming up right before the patient consciously thought, *now*.

This is weird, but it gets weirder the longer you think about it. And I've been thinking about this a lot.

The conscious mind—the "I" that's thinking, hey, I'm thirsty, I'll reach

for that cold cup of water—hasn't really decided anything. The signal to start moving your hand has already traveled halfway down your arm by the time *you* even realize *you* are thirsty. *Thought* is an afterthought. By the way, the brain says, we've decided to move your arm, so please have the thought to move it.

The gap is normally 120 milliseconds, max. Zen extends this minutes. Hours.

If you run into somebody who's on Zen, you won't notice much. The person's brain is still making decisions, and the body still follows orders. You can talk to the them, and they can talk to you. You can tell each other jokes, go out for hamburgers, do homework, have sex.

But the person isn't conscious. There is no "I" there. You might as well be talking to a computer. And *two* people on Zen—"you" and "I"—are just puppets talking to puppets.

It's a little girl's room strewn with teenager. Stuffed animals crowd the shelves and window sills, shoulder to shoulder with stacks of Christian rock CDs and hair brushes and bottles of nail polish. Pin-ups from *Teen People* are taped to the wall, next to a bulletin board dripping with soccer ribbons and rec league gymnastics medals going back to second grade. Above the desk, a plaque titled "I Promise . . ." exhorting Christian youth to abstain from premarital sex. And everywhere taped and pinned to the walls, the photos: Therese at Bible camp, Therese on the balance beam, Therese with her arms around her youth group friends. Every morning she could open her eyes to a thousand reminders of who she was, who she'd been, who she was supposed to become.

I pick up the big stuffed panda that occupies the place of pride on the bed. It looks older than me, and the fur on the face is worn down to the batting. The button eyes hang by white thread—they've been re-sewn, maybe more than once.

Therese's father sets down the pitifully small bag that contains everything I've taken from the hospital: toiletries, a couple of changes of clothes, and five of Dr. S's books. "I guess old Boo Bear was waiting for you," he says.

"Boo W. Bear."

"Yes, Boo W!" It pleases him that I know this. As if it proves anything. "You know, your mother dusted this room every week. She never doubted that you'd come back."

I have never been here, and *she* is not coming back, but already I'm tired of correcting pronouns. "Well, that was nice," I say.

"She's had a tough time of it. She knew people were talking, probably holding her responsible—both of us, really. And she was worried about them saying things about you. She couldn't stand them thinking that you were a wild girl."

"Them?"

He blinks. "The Church."

Ah. *The Church*. The term carried so many feelings and connotations for Therese that months ago I stopped trying to sort them out. The Church was the red-brick building of the Davenport Church of Christ,

shafts of dusty light through rows of tall, glazed windows shaped like gravestones. The Church was God and the Holy Ghost (but not Jesus—he was personal, separate somehow). Mostly, though, it was the congregation, dozens and dozens of people who'd known her since before she was born. They loved her, they watched out for her, and they evaluated her every step. It was like having a hundred overprotective parents.

I almost laugh. "The Church thinks Therese was wild?"

He scowls, but whether because I've insulted the Church or because I keep referring to his daughter by name, I'm not sure. "Of course not. It's just that you caused a lot of worry." His voice has assumed a sober tone that's probably never failed to unnerve his daughter. "You know, the Church prayed for you every week."

"They did?" I do know Therese well enough to be sure this would have mortified her. She was a pray-er, not a pray-ee.

Therese's father watches my face for the bloom of shame, maybe a few tears. From contrition it should have been one small step to confession. It's hard for me to take any of this seriously.

I sit down on the bed and sink deep into the mattress. This is not going to work. The double bed takes up most of the room, with only a few feet of open space around it. Where am I going to meditate?

"Well," Therese's father says. His voice has softened. Maybe he thinks he's won. "You probably want to get changed," he says.

He goes to the door but doesn't leave. I stand by the window, but I can feel him there, waiting. Finally the oddness of this makes me turn around.

He's staring at the floor, a hand behind his neck. Therese might have been able to intuit his mood, but it's beyond me.

"We want to help you, Therese. But there's so many things we just don't understand. Who gave you the drugs, why you went off with that boy, why you would—" His hand moves, a stifled gesture that could be anger, or just frustration. "It's just . . . hard."

"I know," I say. "Me too."

He shuts the door when he leaves, and I push the panda to the floor and flop onto my back in relief. Poor Mr. Klass. He just wants to know if his daughter fell from grace, or was pushed.

When I want to freak myself out, "I" think about "me" thinking about having an "I." The only thing stupider than puppets talking to puppets is a puppet talking to itself.

Dr. S says that nobody knows what the mind is, or how the brain generates it, and nobody *really* knows about consciousness. We talked almost every day while I was in the hospital, and after he saw that I was interested in this stuff—how could I *not* be?—he gave me books and we'd talk about brains and how they cook up thoughts and make decisions.

"How do I explain this?" he always starts. And then he tries out the metaphors he's working on for his book. My favorite is the Parliament, the Page, and the Queen.

"The brain isn't one thing, of course," he told me. "It's millions of firing

cells, and those resolve into hundreds of active sites, and so it is with the mind. There are dozens of nodes in the mind, each one trying to out-shout the others. For any decision, the mind erupts with noise, and that triggers . . . how do I explain this . . . Have you ever seen the British Parliament on C-SPAN?" Of course I had: in a hospital, TV is a constant companion. "These members of the mind's parliament, they're all shouting in chemicals and electrical charges, until enough of the voices are shouting in unison. Ding! That's a 'thought,' a 'decision.' The Parliament immediately sends a signal to the body to act on the decision, and at the same time it tells the Page to take the news—"

"Wait, who's the Page?"

He waves his hand. "That's not important right now." (Weeks later, in a different discussion, Dr. S will explain that the Page isn't one thing, but a cascade of neural events in the temporal area of the limbic system that meshes the neural map of the new thought with the existing neural map—but by then I know that "neural map" is just another metaphor for another deeply complex thing or process, and that I'll never get to the bottom of this. Dr. S said not to worry about it, that *nobody* gets to the bottom of it.) "The Page takes the news of the decision to the Queen."

"All right then, who's the Queen? Consciousness?"

"Exactly right! The self itself."

He beamed at me, his attentive student. Talking about this stuff gets Dr. S going like nothing else, but he's oblivious to the way I let the neck of my scrubs fall open when I stretch out on the couch. If only I could have tucked the two hemispheres of my brain into a lace bra.

"The Page," he said, "delivers its message to Her Majesty, telling her what the Parliament has decided. The Queen doesn't need to know about all the other arguments that went on, all the other possibilities that were thrown out. She simply needs to know what to announce to her subjects. The Queen tells the parts of the body to act on the decision."

"Wait, I thought the Parliament had already sent out the signal. You said before that you can see the brain warming up before the self even knows about it."

"That's the joke. The Queen announces the decision, and she thinks that her subjects are obeying her commands, but in reality, they have already been told what to do. They're already reaching for their glasses of water."

I pad down to the kitchen in bare feet, wearing Therese's sweatpants and a T-shirt. The shirt is a little tight; Therese, champion dieter and Olympic-level purger, was a bit smaller than me.

Alice is at the table, already dressed, a book open in front of her. "Well, you slept in this morning," she says brightly. Her face is made up, her hair sprayed into place. The coffee cup next to the book is empty. She's been waiting for hours.

I look around for a clock, and find one over the door. It's only nine. At the hospital I slept in later than that all the time. "I'm starved," I say. There's a refrigerator, a stove, and dozens of cabinets.

I've never made my own breakfast. Or any lunch or dinner, for that

matter. For my entire life, my meals have been served on cafeteria trays. "Do you have scrambled eggs?"

She blinks. "Eggs? You don't—" She abruptly stands. "Sure. Sit down, Therese, and I'll make you some."

"Just call me 'Terry,' okay?"

Alice stops, thinks about saying something—I can almost hear the clank of cogs and ratchets—until she abruptly strides to the cabinet, crouches, and pulls out a non-stick pan.

I take a guess on which cabinet holds the coffee mugs, guess right, and take the last inch of coffee from the pot. "Don't you have to go to work?" I say. Alice does something at a restaurant supply company; Therese has always been hazy on the details.

"I've taken a leave," she says. She cracks an egg against the edge of the pan, does something subtle with the shells as the yolk squeezes out and plops into the pan, and folds the shell halves into each other. All with one hand.

"Why?"

She smiles tightly. "We couldn't just abandon you after getting you home. I thought we might need some time together. During this adjustment period."

"So when do I have to see this therapist? Whatsisname." My executioner.

"Her. Dr. Mehldau's in Baltimore, so we'll drive there tomorrow." This is their big plan. Dr. Subramaniam couldn't bring back Therese, so they're running to anyone who says they can. "You know, she's had a lot of success with people in your situation. That's her book." She nods at the table.

"So? Dr. Subramaniam is writing one too." I pick up the book. *The Road Home: Finding the Lost Children of Zen*. "What if I don't go along with this?"

She says nothing, chopping at the eggs. I'll be eighteen in four months. Dr. S said that it will become a lot harder for them to hold me then. This ticking clock sounds constantly in my head, and I'm sure it's loud enough for Alice and Mitch to hear it too.

"Let's just try Dr. Mehldau first."

"First? What then?" She doesn't answer. I flash on an image of me tied down to the bed, a priest making a cross over my twisting body. It's a fantasy, not a Therese memory—I can tell the difference. Besides, if this had already happened to Therese, it wouldn't have been a priest.

"Okay then," I say. "What if I just run away?"

"If you turn into a fish," she says lightly, "then I will turn into a fisherman and fish for you."

"What?" I'm laughing. I haven't heard Alice speak in anything but straightforward, earnest sentences.

Alice's smile is sad. "You don't remember?"

"Oh, yeah." The memory clicks. *Runaway Bunny*. Did she like that?"

Dr. S's book is about me. Well, Zen O.D.-ers in general, but there are only a couple thousand of us. Z's not a hugely popular drug, in the U.S. or anywhere else. It's not a hallucinogen. It's not a euphoric or a depressant.

You don't speed, mellow out, or even get high in the normal sense. It's hard to see what the attraction is. Frankly, *I* have trouble seeing it.

Dr. S says that most drugs aren't about making you feel better, they're about not feeling anything at all. They're about numbness, escape. And Zen is a kind of arty, designer escape hatch. Zen disables the Page, locks him in his room, so that he can't make his deliveries to the Queen. There's no update to the neural map, and the Queen stops hearing what Parliament is up to. With no orders to bark, she goes silent. It's that silence that people like Therese craved.

But the real attraction—again, for people like Therese—is the overdose. Swallow way too much Zen and the Page can't get out for weeks. When he finally gets out, he can't remember the way back to the Queen's castle. The whole process of updating the self that's been going on for years is suddenly derailed. The silent Queen can't be found.

The Page, poor guy, does the only thing he can. He goes out and delivers the proclamations to the first girl he sees.

The Queen is dead. Long live the Queen.

"Hi, Terry. I'm Dr. Mehldau." She's a stubby woman with a pleasant round face, and short dark hair shot with gray. She offers me her hand. Her fingers are cool and thin.

"You called me Terry."

"I was told that you prefer to go by that. Do you want me to call you something else?"

"No . . . I just expected you to make me say my name is 'Therese' over and over."

She laughs and sits down in a red leather chair that looks soft but sturdy. "I don't think that would be very helpful, do you? I can't make you do anything you don't want to do, Terry."

"So I'm free to go."

"Can't stop you. But I do have to report back to your parents on how we're doing."

*My parents.*

She shrugs. "It's my job. Why don't you have a seat and we can talk about why you're here."

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The chair opposite her is cloth, not leather, but it's still nicer than anything in Dr. Subramaniam's office. The entire office is nicer than Dr. S's office. Daffodil walls in white trim, big windows glowing behind white cloth shades, tropically colored paintings.

I don't sit down.

"Your job is to turn me into Mitch and Alice's daughter. I'm not going to do that. So any time we spend talking is just bullshit."

"Terry, no one can turn you into something you're not."

"Well then we're done here." I walk across the room—though "stroll" is what I'm shooting for—and pick up an African-looking wooden doll from the bookshelf. The shelves are decorated with enough books to look serious, but there are long open spaces for arty arrangements of candlesticks and Japanese fans and plaques that advertise awards and appreciations. Dr. S's bookshelves are for holding books, and books stacked on books. Dr. Mehldau's bookshelves are for selling the idea of Dr. Mehldau.

"So what are you, a psychiatrist or a psychologist or what?" I've met all kinds in the hospital. The psychiatrists are MDs like Dr. S and can give you drugs. I haven't figured out what the psychologists are good for.

"Neither," she says. "I'm a counselor."

"So what's the 'doctor' for?"

"Education." Her voice didn't change, but I get the impression that the question's annoyed her. This makes me strangely happy.

"Okay, Dr. Counselor, what are you supposed to counsel me about? I'm not crazy. I know who Therese was, I know what she did, I know that she used to walk around in my body." I put the doll back in its spot next to a glass cube that could be a paperweight. "But I'm not her. This is my body, and I'm not going to kill myself just so Alice and Mitch can have their baby girl back."

"Terry, no one's asking you to kill yourself. Nobody can even make you into who you were before."

"Yeah? Then what are they paying you for, then?"

"Let me try to explain. Please, sit down. Please."

I look around for a clock and finally spot one on a high shelf. I mentally set the timer to five minutes and sit opposite her, hands on my knees. "Shoot."

"Your parents asked me to talk to you because I've helped other people in your situation, people who've overdosed on Z."

"Help them what? Pretend to be something they're not?"

"I help them take back what they *are*. Your experience of the world tells you that Therese was some other person. No one's denying that. But you're in a situation where biologically and legally, you're Therese Klass. Do you have plans for dealing with that?"

As a matter of fact I do, and it involves getting the hell out as soon as possible. "I'll deal with it," I say.

"What about Alice and Mitch?"

I shrug. "What about them?"

"They're still your parents, and you're still their child. The overdose convinced you that you're a new person, but that hasn't changed who they are. They're still responsible for you, and they still care for you."

"Not much I can do about that."

"You're right. It's a fact of your life. You have two people who love you, and you're going to be with each other for the rest of your lives. You're going to have to figure out how to relate to each other. Zen may have burned the bridge between you and your past life, but you can build that bridge again."

"Doc, I don't *want* to build that bridge. Look, Alice and Mitch seem like nice people, but if I was looking for parents, I'd pick someone else."

Dr. Mehldau smiles. "None of us get to choose our parents, Terry."

I'm not in the mood to laugh. I nod toward the clock. "This is a waste of time."

She leans forward. I think she's going to try to touch me, but she doesn't. "Terry, you're not going to disappear if we talk about what happened to you. You'll still be here. The only difference is that you'll reclaim those memories as your own. You can get your old life back *and* choose your new life."

Sure, it's that easy. I get to sell my soul and keep it too.

I can't remember my first weeks in the hospital, though Dr. S says I was awake. At some point I realized that time was passing, or rather, that there was a me who was passing through time. *I had lasagna for dinner yesterday, I am having meat loaf today. I am this girl in a bed. I think I realized this and forgot it several times before I could hold onto it.*

Every day was mentally exhausting, because everything was so relentlessly *new*. I stared at the TV remote for a half hour, the name for it on the tip of my tongue, and it wasn't until the nurse picked it up and turned on the TV for me that I thought: *Remote*. And then sometimes, this was followed by a raft of other ideas: *TV. Channel. Gameshow.*

People were worse. They called me by a strange name, and they expected things of me. But to me, every visitor, from the night shift nurse to the janitor to Alice and Mitch Klass, seemed equally important—which is to say, not important at all.

Except for Dr. S. He was there from the beginning, and so he was familiar before I met him. He belonged to me like my own body.

But everything else about the world—the names, the details, the *facts*—had to be hauled into the sunlight, one by one. My brain was like an attic, chock full of old and interesting things jumbled together in no order at all.

I only gradually understood that somebody must have owned this house before me. And then I realized the house was haunted.

After the Sunday service, I'm caught in a stream of people. They lean across the pews to hug Alice and Mitch, then me. They pat my back, squeeze my arms, kiss my cheeks. I know from brief dips into Therese's memories that many of these people are as emotionally close as aunts or uncles. And any of them, if Therese were ever in trouble, would take her in, feed her, and give her a bed to sleep in.

This is all very nice, but the constant petting has me ready to scream.

All I want to do is get back home and take off this dress. I had no choice but to wear one of Therese's girly-girl extravaganzas. Her closet was full

of them, and I finally found one that fit, if not comfortably. She loved these dresses, though. They were her floral print flak jackets. Who could doubt the purity of a girl in a high-necked Laura Ashley?

We gradually make our way to the vestibule, then to the sidewalk and the parking lot, under assault the entire way. I stop trying to match their faces to anything in Therese's memories.

At our car, a group of teenagers take turns on me, the girls hugging me tight, the boys leaning into me with half hugs: shoulders together, pelvises apart. One of the girls, freckled, with soft red curls falling past her shoulders, hangs back for awhile, then abruptly clutches me and whispers into my ear, "I'm so glad you're okay, Miss T." Her tone is intense, like she's passing a secret message.

A man moves through the crowd, arms open, smiling broadly. He's in his late twenties or early thirties, his hair cut in a choppy gelled style that's ten years too young for him. He's wearing pressed khakis, a blue Oxford rolled up at the forearms, a checked tie loosened at the throat.

He smothers me in a hug, his cologne like another set of arms. He's easy to find in Therese's memories: This is Jared, the Youth Pastor. He was the most spiritually vibrant person Therese knew, and the object of her crush.

"It's so good to have you back, Therese," he says. His cheek is pressed to mine. "We've missed you."

A few months before her overdose, the youth group was coming back from a weekend-long retreat in the church's converted school bus. Late into the trip, near midnight, Jared sat next to her, and she fell asleep leaning against him, inhaling that same cologne.

"I bet you have," I say. "Watch the hands, *Jared*."

His smile doesn't waver, his hands are still on my shoulders. "I'm sorry?"

"Oh please, you heard me."

He drops his hands, and looks questioningly at my father. He can do sincerity pretty well. "I don't understand, Therese, but if—"

I give him a look that makes him back up a step. At some point later in the trip Therese awoke with Jared still next to her, slumped in the seat, eyes closed and mouth open. His arm was resting between her thighs, a thumb against her knee. She was wearing shorts, and his flesh on hers was hot. His forearm was inches from her warm crotch.

Therese believed that he was asleep.

She believed, too, that it was the rumbling of the school bus that shifted Jared's arm into contact with the crease of her shorts. Therese froze, flushed with arousal and embarrassment.

"Try to work it out, Jared." I get in the car.

The big question I can help answer, Dr. S said, is why there is consciousness. Or, going back to my favorite metaphor, if the Parliament is making all the decisions, why have a Queen at all?

He's got theories, of course. He thinks the Queen is all about storytelling. The brain needs a story that gives all these decisions a sense of purpose, a sense of continuity, so it can remember them and use them in future decisions. The brain can't keep track of the trillions of possible *other* decisions it could have made every moment; it needs one decision, and

it needs a who, and a why. The brain lays down the memories, and the consciousness stamps them with identity: *I did this, I did that*. Those memories become the official record, the precedents that the Parliament uses to help make future decisions.

"The Queen, you see, is a figurehead," Dr. S said. "She represents the kingdom, but she isn't the kingdom itself, or even in control of it."

"I don't feel like a figurehead," I said.

Dr. S laughed. "Me neither. Nobody does."

Dr. Mehldau's therapy involves occasional joint sessions with Alice and Mitch, reading aloud from Therese's old diaries, and home movies. Today's video features a pre-teen Therese dressed in sheets, surrounded by kids in bathrobes, staring fixedly at a doll in a manger.

Dr. Mehldau asks me what Therese was thinking then. Was she enjoying playing Mary? Did she like being on stage?

"How would I know?"

"Then imagine it. What do you *think* Therese is thinking here?"

She tells me to do that a lot. Imagine what she's thinking. Just pretend. Put yourself in her shoes. In her book she calls this "reclaiming." She makes up a lot of her own terms, then defines them however she wants, without research to back her up. Compared to the neurology texts Dr. S lent me, Dr. Mehldau's little book is an Archie comic with footnotes.

"You know what, Therese was a good Christian girl, so she probably loved it."

"Are you sure?"

The wise men come on stage, three younger boys. They plop down their gifts and their lines, and the look on Therese's face is wary. Her line is coming up.

Therese was petrified of screwing up. Everybody would be staring at her. I can almost see the congregation in the dark behind the lights. Alice and Mitch are out there, and they're waiting for every line. My chest tightens, and I realize I'm holding my breath.

Dr. Mehldau's eyes on mine are studiously neutral.

"You know what?" I have no idea what I'm going to say next. I'm stalling for time. I shift my weight in the big beige chair and move a leg underneath me. "The thing I like about Buddhism is Buddhists understand that they've been screwed by a whole string of previous selves. I had nothing to do with the decisions Therese made, the good or bad karma she'd acquired."

This is a riff I've been thinking about in Therese's big girly bedroom. "See, Therese was a Christian, so she probably thought by overdosing that she'd be born again, all her sins forgiven. It's the perfect drug for her: suicide without the corpse."

"Was she thinking about suicide that night?"

"*I don't know*. I could spend a couple weeks mining through Therese's memories, but frankly, I'm not interested. Whatever she was thinking, she wasn't born again. I'm here, and I'm still saddled with her baggage. I am Therese's donkey. I'm a karma donkey."

Dr. Mehldau nods. "Dr. Subramaniam is Buddhist, isn't he?"

"Yeah, but what's. . . ?" It clicks. I roll my eyes. Dr. S and I talked about transference, and I know that my crush on him was par for the course. And it's true that I spend a lot of time—still—thinking about fucking the man. But that doesn't mean I'm wrong. "This is not about that," I say. "I've been thinking about this on my own."

She doesn't fight me on that. "Wouldn't a Buddhist say that you and Therese share the same soul? Self's an illusion. So there's no rider in charge, no donkey. There's just *you*."

"Just forget it," I say.

"Let's follow this, Terry. Don't you feel you have a responsibility to your old self? Your old self's parents, your old friends? Maybe there's karma you *owe*."

"And who are you responsible to, Doctor? Who's your patient? Therese, or me?"

She says nothing for a moment, then: "I'm responsible to you."

You.

You swallow, surprised that the pills taste like cinnamon. The effect of the drug is intermittent at first. You realize that you're in the back seat of a car, the cellphone in your hand, your friends laughing around you. You're talking to your mother. If you concentrate, you can remember answering the phone, and telling her which friend's house you're staying at tonight. Before you can say goodbye, you're stepping out of the car. The car is parked, your phone is away—and you remember saying goodnight to your mother and riding for a half hour before finding this parking garage. Joelly tosses her red curls and tugs you toward the stairwell: *Come on, Miss T!*

Then you look up and realize that you're on the sidewalk outside an all-ages club, and you're holding a ten dollar bill, ready to hand it to the bouncer. The music thunders every time the door swings open. You turn to Joelly and—

You're in someone else's car. On the Interstate. The driver is a boy you met hours ago, his name is Rush but you haven't asked if that's his first name or his last. In the club you leaned into each other and talked loud over the music about parents and food and the difference between the taste of a fresh cigarette in your mouth and the smell of stale smoke. But then you realize that there's a cigarette in your mouth, you took it from Rush's pack yourself, and you don't like cigarettes. Do you like it now? You don't know. Should you take it out, or keep smoking? You scour your memories, but can discover no reason why you decided to light the cigarette, no reason why you got into the car with this boy. You start to tell yourself a story: he must be a trustworthy person, or you wouldn't have gotten into the car. You took that one cigarette because the boy's feelings would have been hurt.

You're not feeling like yourself tonight. And you like it. You take another drag off the cigarette. You think back over the past few hours, and marvel at everything you've done, all without that constant weight of self-reflection: worry, anticipation, instant regret. Without the inner voice constantly critiquing you.

Now the boy is wearing nothing but boxer shorts, and he's reaching up to a shelf to get a box of cereal, and his back is beautiful. There is hazy light outside the small kitchen window. He pours Froot Loops into a bowl for you, and he laughs, though quietly because his mother is asleep in the next room. He looks at your face and frowns. He asks you what's the matter. You look down, and you're fully dressed. You think back, and realize that you've been in this boy's apartment for hours. You made out in his bedroom, and the boy took off his clothes, and you kissed his chest and ran your hands along his legs. You let him put his hand under your shirt and cup your breasts, but you didn't go any further. Why didn't you have sex? Did he not interest you? No—you were wet. You were excited. Did you feel guilty? Did you feel ashamed?

What were you thinking?

When you get home there will be hell to pay. Your parents will be furious, and worse, they will pray for you. The entire church will pray for you. Everyone will *know*. And no one will ever look at you the same again.

Now there's a cinnamon taste in your mouth, and you're sitting in the boy's car again, outside a convenience store. It's afternoon. Your cell phone is ringing. You turn off the cell phone and put it back in your purse. You swallow, and your throat is dry. That boy—Rush—is buying you another bottle of water. What was it you swallowed? Oh, yes. You think back, and remember putting all those little pills in your mouth. Why did you take so many? Why did you take another one at all? Oh, yes.

Voices drift up from the kitchen. It's before 6 AM, and I just want to pee and get back to sleep, but then I realize they're talking about me.

"She doesn't even *walk* the same. The way she holds herself, the way she talks . . ."

"It's all those books Dr. Subramaniam gave her. She's up past one every night. Therese never read like that, not *science*."

"No, it's not just the words, it's how she *sounds*. That low voice . . ." She sobs. "Oh hon, I didn't know it would be this way. It's like she's right, it's like it isn't her at all."

He doesn't say anything. Alice's crying grows louder, subsides. The clink of dishes in the sink. I step back, and Mitch speaks again.

"Maybe we should try the camp," he says.

"No, no, no! Not yet. Dr. Mehldau says she's making progress. We've got to—"

"Of course she's going to say that."

"You said you'd try this, you said you'd give this a chance." The anger cuts through the weeping, and Mitch mumbles something apologetic. I creep back to my bedroom, but I still have to pee, so I make a lot of noise going back out. Alice comes to the bottom of the stairs. "Are you all right, honey?"

I keep my face sleepy and walk into the bathroom. I shut the door and sit down on the toilet in the dark.

*What fucking camp?*

\* \* \*



"Let's try again," Dr. Mehldau said. "Something pleasant and vivid."

I'm having trouble concentrating. The brochure is like a bomb in my pocket. It wasn't hard to find, once I decided to look for it. I want to ask Dr. Mehldau about the camp, but I know that once I bring it into the open, I'll trigger a showdown between the doctor and the Klases, with me in the middle.

"Keep your eyes closed," she says. "Think about Therese's tenth birthday. In her diary, she wrote that was the best birthday she'd ever had. Do you remember Sea World?"

"Vaguely." I could see dolphins jumping—two at a time, three at a time. It had been sunny and hot. With every session it was getting easier for me to pop into Therese's memories. Her life was on DVD, and I had the remote.

"Do you remember getting wet at the Namu and Shamu show?"

I laughed. "I think so." I could see the metal benches, the glass wall just in front of me, the huge shapes in the blue-green water. "They had the whales flip their big tail fins. We got drenched."

"Can you picture who was there with you? Where are your parents?"

There was a girl, my age, I can't remember her name. The sheets of water were coming down on us and we were screaming and laughing. Afterward my parents towed us off. They must have been sitting up high, out of the splash zone. Alice looked much younger: happier, and a little heavier. She was wider at the hips. This was before she started dieting and exercising, when she was Mom-sized.

My eyes pop open. "Oh God."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine—it was just . . . like you said. Vivid." That image of a younger Alice still burns. For the first time I realize how *sad* she is now.

"I'd like a joint session next time," I say.

"Really? All right. I'll talk to Alice and Mitch. Is there anything in particular you want to talk about?"

"Yeah. We need to talk about Therese."

Dr. S says everybody wants to know if the original neural map, the old

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Queen, can come back. Once the map to the map is lost, can you find it again? And if you do, then what happens to the new neural map, the new Queen?

"Now, a good Buddhist would tell you that this question is unimportant. After all, the cycle of existence is not just between lives. *Samsara* is every moment. The self continuously dies and recreates itself."

"Are you a good Buddhist?" I asked him.

He smiled. "Only on Sunday mornings."

"You go to church?"

"I golf."

There's a knock and I open my eyes. Alice steps into my room, a stack of folded laundry in her arms. "Oh!"

I've rearranged the room, pushing the bed into the corner to give me a few square feet of free space on the floor.

Her face goes through a few changes. "I don't suppose you're praying."

"No."

She sighs, but it's a mock-sigh. "I didn't think so." She moves around me and sets the laundry on the bed. She picks up the book there, *Entering the Stream*. "Dr. Subramaniam gave you this?"

She's looking at the passage I've highlighted. *But loving kindness—maitri—toward ourselves doesn't mean getting rid of anything. The point is not to try to change ourselves. Meditation practice isn't about trying to throw ourselves away and become something better. It's about befriending who we already are.*

"Well." She sets the book down, careful to leave it open to the same page. "That sounds a bit like Dr. Mehldau."

I laugh. "Yeah, it does. Did she tell you I wanted you and Mitch to be at the next session?"

"We'll be there." She works around the room, picking up t-shirts and underwear. I stand up to get out of the way. Somehow she manages to straighten up as she moves—righting books that had fallen over, setting Boo W. Bear back to his place on the bed, sweeping an empty chip bag into the garbage can—so that as she collects my dirty laundry she's cleaning the entire room, like the Cat in the Hat's cleaner-upper machine.

"Alice, in the last session I remembered being at Sea World, but there was a girl next to me. Next to Therese."

"Sea World? Oh, that was the Hammel girl, Marcy. They took you to Ohio with them on their vacation that year."

"Who did?"

"The Hammels. You were gone all week. All you wanted for your birthday was spending money for the trip."

"You weren't there?"

She picks up the jeans I left at the foot of the bed. "We always meant to go to Sea World, but your father and I never got out there."

"This is our last session," I say.

Alice, Mitch, Dr. Mehldau: I have their complete attention.

The doctor, of course, is the first to recover. "It sounds like you've got something you want to tell us."

"Oh yeah."

Alice seems frozen, holding herself in check. Mitch rubs the back of his neck, suddenly intent on the carpet.

"I'm not going along with this anymore." I make a vague gesture. "Everything: the memory exercises, all this imagining of what Therese felt. I finally figured it out. It doesn't matter to you if I'm Therese or not. You just want me to think I'm her. I'm not going along with the manipulation anymore."

Mitch shakes his head. "Honey, you took a *drug*." He glances at me, looks back at his feet. "If you took LSD and saw God, that doesn't mean you really saw God. Nobody's trying to manipulate you, we're trying to *undo* the manipulation."

"That's bullshit, Mitch. You all keep acting like I'm schizophrenic, that I don't know what's real or not. Well, part of the problem is that the longer I talk to Dr. Mehldau here, the more fucked up I am."

Alice gasps.

Dr. Mehldau puts out a hand to soothe her, but her eyes are on me. "Terry, what your father's trying to say is that even though you feel like a new person, there's a *you* that existed before the drug. That exists now."

"Yeah? You know all those O.D.-ers in your book who say they've 'reclaimed' themselves? Maybe they only *feel* like their old selves."

"It's *possible*," she says. "But I don't think they're fooling themselves. They've come to accept the parts of themselves they've lost, the family members they've left behind. They're people like you." She regards me with that standard-issue look of concern that doctors pick up with their diplomas. "Do you really want to feel like an orphan the rest of your life?"

"What?" From out of nowhere, tears well in my eyes. I cough to clear my throat, and the tears keep coming, until I smear them off on my arm. I feel like I've been sucker punched. "Hey, look Alice, just like you," I say.

"It's normal," Dr. Mehldau says. "When you woke up in the hospital, you felt completely alone. You felt like a brand new person, no family, no friends. And you're still just starting down this road. In a lot of ways you're not even two years old."

"Damn you're good," I say. "I didn't even see that one coming."

"Please, don't leave. Let's—"

"Don't worry, I'm not leaving yet." I'm at the door, pulling my backpack from the peg by the door. I dig into the pocket, and pull out the brochure. "You know about this?"

Alice speaks for the first time. "Oh honey, no . . ."

Dr. Mehldau takes it from me, frowning. On the front is a nicely posed picture of a smiling teenage boy hugging relieved parents. She looks at Alice and Mitch. "Are you considering this?"

"It's their big stick, Dr. Mehldau. If you can't come through for them, or I bail out, *boom*. You know what goes on there?"

She opens the pages, looking at pictures of the cabins, the obstacle course, the big lodge where kids just like me engage in "intense group

sessions with trained counselors" where they can "recover their true identities." She shakes her head. "Their approach is different than mine . . ."

"I don't know, doc. Their *approach* sounds an awful lot like 'reclaiming.' I got to hand it to you, you had me going for awhile. Those visualization exercises? I was getting so good that I could even visualize stuff that never happened. I bet you could visualize me right into Therese's head."

I turn to Alice and Mitch. "You've got a decision to make. Dr. Mehldau's program is a bust. So are you sending me off to brainwashing camp or not?"

Mitch has his arm around his wife. Alice, amazingly, is dry-eyed. Her eyes are wide, and she's staring at me like a stranger.

It rains the entire trip back from Baltimore, and it's still raining when we pull up to the house. Alice and I run to the porch step, illuminated by the glare of headlights. Mitch waits until Alice unlocks the door and we move inside, and then pulls away.

"Does he do that a lot?" I ask.

"He likes to drive when he's upset."

"Oh." Alice goes through the house, turning on lights. I follow her into the kitchen.

"Don't worry, he'll be all right." She opens the refrigerator door and crouches down. "He just doesn't know what to do with you."

"He wants to put me in the camp, then."

"Oh, not that. He just never had a daughter who talked back to him before." She carries a Tupperware cake holder to the table. "I made carrot cake. Can you get down the plates?"

She's such a small woman. Face to face, she comes up only to my chin. The hair on the top of her head is thin, made thinner by the rain, and her scalp is pink.

"I'm not Therese. I never will be Therese."

"Oh, I know," she says, half sighing. And she does know it; I can see it in her face. "It's just that you look so much like her."

I laugh. "I can dye my hair. Maybe get a nose job."

"It wouldn't work, I'd still recognize you." She pops the lid and sets it aside. The cake is a wheel with icing that looks half an inch thick. Miniature candy carrots line the edge.

"Wow, you made that before we left? Why?"

Alice shrugs, and cuts into it. She turns the knife on its side and uses the blade to lever a huge triangular wedge onto my plate. "I thought we might need it, one way or another."

She places the plate in front of me, and touches me lightly on the arm. "I know you want to move out. I know you may never want to come back."

"It's not that I—"

"We're not going to stop you. But wherever you go, you'll still be my daughter, whether you like it or not. You don't get to decide who loves you."

"Alice . . ."

"Shhh. Eat your cake." O

Lou Antonelli is a native of Massachusetts who moved to Texas twenty years ago. He has been a newspaperman ever since. Lou took up writing science fiction as a middle-aged whim in 2002 and has since been published in *Andromeda Spaceways In-Flight Magazine*, *RevolutionSF*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Surprising Stories*, and other magazines. His first story for us is either a tall tale or a wry account of . . .

# A ROCKET FOR THE REPUBLIC

Lou Antonelli

**“W**ell, I cain’t believe you found me, way out here! I was only joshing when I told the old boys at the feed store you could come out and see me. Damn, you’re determined, ain’t you?

“I know I ain’t got no telephone. At my age, I don’t need no one bothering me, anyhow. Still, I gotta give you credit for coming way on out here. You just doubled the population of Science Hill, or what’s left of it. Which is me.

“Yep, I’m the birthday boy. Done reached a hundred. I guess that’s why you drove all the way out here. Well, I’d be inhospitable if I sent you home without at least visiting with you. We can sit right out here on the porch on this swing seat, just set your dispatch case over there on top the railing.

“What’s that picture in there? Oh, that’s a magazine. Right pretty picture. Is that a rocket ship? You read science fiction, eh? Kinda like Jules Verne and Mr. Wells? Interesting.

“Ah know you came out to talk to some old fool who just happened to reach a hundred years old. Well, Mr. Editor, how about I give you a real story? I’ve never done told anyone about this before, but maybe it’s about damn time.

“Would you believe I rode in a rocket once? Yep, and it wasn’t on TV. No, it was a lot longer ago than that. A lot longer.

"If'n you promise not to interrupt me, I'll tell you the whole story. I don't want no questions, because a lot of what I'll say won't make any sense until I finish. Agreed? Good."

"I was already an old man when this happened. I was a widower then. I had married late, when I was twenty. That was in '23. We married in Tennessee and came out here with the impresario Hayden Edwards in '28. We had a little one, but she weren't but a year old when we all came down with Yellow Fever in '30. I pulled through but my wife and the baby didn't.

"We lived in Nacogdoches, but after that I didn't feel like keeping the farm up. So I sold it and went to hire myself out. There was talk that ferry men were needed on the Trinity River. Settlers were beginning to make their way up to Dallas. I went to live at the ferry landing on the road between Nacogdoches and Waco.

"One day I went out hunting. When I came back, the other men said Jim Bowie had come through. He was heading toward San Antonio de Bexar, where a gang of Texians were fixin' to mix it up with the Napoleon of the West. Some of them went with Bowie.

"After he cleaned them all out, Santa Anna began a march, like he was going to clean us all the hell out of the province, too. People got the word and scooted out without their hats and bonnets. It was called the Runaway Scrape. I had holed up at the crossing. I figured someone needed to run the ferry, whether it was for Texians or Mexicans.

"Thing was, I guess that great ol' Second Napoleon got cocky and Gen. Houston caught him napping with his arm around his yellow rose. That was at San Jacinto Bayou. That's when Texas became a republic.

"None of the other ferrymen ever came back from the War for Independence. I guess they must have got themselves kilt. I pretty much kept up things with the help of a few hangers-on, and worked my hams raw for a good four years. Then one day a regular damn procession came down the coach road from Nacogdoches.

"There was a fine coach and seven wagons, some of the biggest wagons I had ever seen. This fellow who sounded like a limey said they weighed five to ten tons each. I just burst out laughing and told them there weren't no way that sorry little ferryboat could haul any of them, and I asked him where the hell he was going. He said he didn't quite know.

"He was a nice fellow, talked to me right respectful. He said he was a 'scientist'—first time I had ever heard that word—and he needed to find a place away from any cities where he could work with his engines and apparatuses.

"I knew a farmstead that had been abandoned since the Runaway Scrape. I told him he didn't need to go no further, I knew a place he could probably have for naught if he bothered to go back to Nacogdoches and register the deed.

"He looked at my pissant ferry and across the Trinity bottoms and said it sounded like a good idea. I took them to where the farm was.

"The teamsters left all the wagons, and rode back to Louisiana. The gentleman asked me to get up a work crew for a barn raising and I did. I got men from the ferry landing, as well from Corsicana and Tyler, and we went to sawing and pegging the largest barn we could put together. It only took a week.



"He paid everyone in new U.S. silver, and afterward asked me if I would stay and help him at his labber-ra-tory. He'd always been civil to me, and I couldn't see hows working for him could be worse than pulling a ferry.

"His name was Mr. Seaton. I think his Christian name was Robert, but I always called him Mr. Seaton. He was a real British gentlemen, always talked to me polite and never cussed at me.

"Mr. Seaton told me he knew the men in England who were working on the steam railroad. There were no railroads in the Republic then.

"He said he thought the railroads would be dirty and hateful, with steel rails running across the land and the steam engines putting out soot and cinders. He had a better idea, he said.

"The first time he said he thought people could travel between cities by air, I thought for sure he meant balloons. But he said he wanted to make a rocket, just like the ones they used in the Army at night, but large enough to hold people, and shoot them between cities.

"Of course, I thought that sounded like the biggest fool idea I ever heard, but when he explained it and made some drawings on paper, I actually began to believe him. He said the Congreve Rockets like they used in the British artillery could travel for miles, and if a rocket was bigger, it could go farther. If it was big enough to carry people, it could go hundreds of miles.

"Instead of locomotives running past you putting out soot and cinders, these rockets would just fly over your head. Nobody would notice them. And they could go from city to city in minutes instead of hours.

"The biggest problem would be a soft landing, but he had designed a set of silk canopies—I guess you call them parachutes today—that would loose and let the rocket drift down like a leaf. He sounded mighty reasonable.

"He got together his engines and equipment in the East Coast, but he figgered setting off rockets would spook the neighbors.

"He thought he'd find the empty space he needed and set up his workshop here in Texas, and as large as the Republic was, it could use his service more than anyone.

"Those wagons he brought all the way from New Orleans, they had all the steel plate and boilers and engines he needed to make his rocket. And I helped him put it all together.

"Mostly, I did a lot of riveting. The winter of '40 I kept the doors of the barn open because of the heat as I stoked the coal and pounded those rivets. Mr. Seaton was real good with drawing and explaining his drawings and so I was able to rivet and screw everything together, although I didn't the hell understand half of it. He had a steam engine that squeezed air and could make it liquid. I saw him make liquid air and put it in a silvered glass bottle. He said good old gunpowder wouldn't cut the mustard to shoot such a large rocket. But he said when you mixed the liquid air and alcohol and lit 'em, it would burn like hell. Did, too, the time he showed me.

"Mr. Seaton never left the place and worked all hours of the day. I would go to Athens every so often and get supplies. He pretty much had brought everything he needed for the rocket ship. There was plenty of wood for his steam engine, and of course I knew how to use a still to make alcohol.

"It took nearly two whole years, but by the spring of '42 the rocket's nose was out a hole in the barn's roof. It had vanes on the bottom proping it up on the ground.

"When he thought we were ready to try the rocket, we moved the equipment to the farmhouse and put it up safe.

"He had a setup in the rocket where he would sit on a seat and turn a wheel that moved the vanes on the bottom, so he could steer as it shot up. He had a second seat in front of a big mica window, maybe six inches around, where I could sit and tell him what I saw. We had belts and buckles and straps all around that we could use to tie ourselves down so we wouldn't go bouncing around like inside a biscuit tin.

"When we were ready for the big test, I have to say, I was scared, but after being with him all that time, I couldn't let him down. So I just gritted my teeth and prayed Jesus to come down safe.

"Mr. Seaton pumped gallons of alcohol in one side of the rocket and gallons of that freezing liquid air in the other side. Then we climbed a few bales of hay and lashed ourselves inside.

"He had some kind of battery set-up to make the spark to set off the stuff, and when he threw the lever, my heart just about stopped. But we didn't explode!

"The rocket rumbled and shook. When I looked out the window I didn't see the barn, but I did see the trees getting smaller. It felt like lead in my chest, and I could hardly keep my eyes open, but I could see the trees like the birds see them, and I knew we were rising up. I looked over to Mr. Seaton and he had a big smile on his face.

"After a few minutes the pain in my chest let up a little, but I saw Mr. Seaton beginning to frown. I saw he couldn't turn the wheel, and he was cussing himself—that was the only time I ever heard him cuss. I think the problem was the rocket was moving so fast the wind was pushing too hard on those vanes at the end and he couldn't turn them.

"Finally, he called me, and I unhitched myself and scooted over to his seat. I held onto a strap with one hand and with my free hand helped him to try to turn the wheel.

"I could see Mr. Seaton begin to sweat. After a while he told me to go back to my seat. It seemed like forever, but in a few minutes the wheel finally began to turn. But I didn't feel no difference in the rocket. And then I noticed my straps were starting to coil around me like a snake!

"The alcohol and liquid air was all burned up, so the roaring sound had let up. But then we both heard a hissing sound. I thought maybe it was something outside, so I looked through the mica window again.

"I couldn't believe my eyes. It looked like I was looking down at a big billiard ball, but it was blue and fuzzy. It also had brown and white scum all over it.

"The hissing sound got louder. I looked down and saw I was floating two inches above my seat, like a Hindu fakir!

"I looked over to Mr. Seaton, who had his head in his hands.

"Doomed," was all he said.

"Then I realized what had gone wrong. Because he couldn't steer, we didn't make a big looping curve like he showed me on a piece of paper once. We were supposed to make a big lazy curve up from Texas and come down in Philadelphia—like a rainbow.

"But instead we shot straight the hell up! That billiard ball down there

was the earth, the blue was the ocean and the brown and white scum was the ground and clouds.

"I knew that our doors were tight and the rivets solid, but the air outside must have been thinner than the air on top of the highest Rocky Mountain, and so our air was hissing out the seams. I guess it was because our air began to get thin that we started to float around.

"I knew it was curtains for us, so I cleared my throat and told Mr. Seaton I was honored to have been his employee.

"Thank you, James," was all he said.

"I began to get real light-headed and it was hard to breathe, when I saw a bright light in the window. I thought for a second we were heading into the sun, but then the light passed us. A minute later, the rocket jolted like a giant baby had just grabbed a play pretty. Then the levers on the door began to pop. I got a buzzing in my head and just as I passed out I saw the door open."

"Well, as you can imagine, I thought it was the angels come for me, but when I woke up I wiggled my toes and fingers and saw I still was alive, and in the softest feather bed I ever had seen.

"The room was plain, clean and white. I propped myself up on my elbow. Then Mr. Seaton walked in a door I hadn't noticed along with this strange fellow.

"He was tall and looked like he could be a Chinaman, but his slanted eyes were too large and he was as pale as a ghost. Mr. Seaton was smiling now and he gave me his hand so I could get off the bed. He explained that the other fellow and his posse lived on another world, like ours but far away, and they used rockets not only to go between cities but worlds.

"You mean like Mars?" I asked.

"Yes, like Mars," he said, 'but much farther away.'

"He said these fellows had like a lighthouse, I guess, out there between worlds, and the lighthouse keeper had seen us come adrift and sent out a lifeboat rocket ship.

"When I understood this, I turned and bowed with my hands together like I had seen a Chinese do once. The tall fellow bowed, too, and I thought he kinda smiled.

"Mr. Seaton said although his plan for a rocket railroad had come a cropper, he was happier now because of meeting his new friends, and during the days we were in their rocket, he spent almost the whole time talking to them.

"They were civil to me, too. I talked to them, and when they talked back at me, for some reason their voice always seemed to come from a pillbox on their arm. I don't know why they had to throw their voices.

"I think they knew I didn't have any book learning. Anytime we talked about anything very complicated, I would lose the rabbit I was chasing. Mr. Seaton tried to explain things to me simple-like so I could understand better.

"Sometimes we could look out a window—a real big one, bigger than a window in a New Orleans whorehouse—and see the world turning below us like a gristmill. When the clouds were sparse, Mr. Seaton would point out whole countries.

“‘See that boot? That’s Italy.’

“The pale fellows told me I could go wherever I wanted in their rocket—which was pretty damn big, I tell you.

“One day I went by a door and saw a glow like from a fireplace, ’cept it was blue instead of red. I thought that was peculiar and I went inside. The blue fire glow was coming out from some filigree on the walls.

“Wasn’t but a minute later a passel of the pale fellows came running in the door and they grabbed me like they was hogs and I was a pumpkin. Mr. Seaton came running in, too.

“The pale fellows tossed me right quick into a bed and stuck needles into me like I was an old woman’s pincushion. In a corner some of them talked to Mr. Seaton, who looked more worried. After all the hoo-rah died down, Mr. Seaton told me what the problem was.

“These fellows had a special coal that burned blue instead of red. Problem was, the blue fire was just as ‘hot’ as regular fire—but you couldn’t feel it! It was just like I had stepped into a furnace, when I went in that room with the blue glow.

“He said that although I didn’t feel anything then, in a few minutes I would have shriveled up like bacon and died.

“Later Mr. Seaton told me the pale fellows realized, after I had the accident with the blue furnace, that maybe it was better I go back home.

“Truth be told, I was getting homesick myself. Mr. Seaton said he wanted to stay with his new friends. He told me they could set me down right back where we started and soon, Mr. Seaton and I and a few of the pale fellows got into a kind of round lifeboat rocket and floated like a balloon in the middle of the night down to the farm.

“Mr. Seaton shook my hand like a brother and told me where the strongbox was with all his papers. He said I could have everything he left behind as my due for being such a good employee.

“I bounded down the steel gangplank and waved good-bye. They left like a mist in the night. There was a full moon and I found my way to the farmhouse. I lit the whale oil lamp and got ready for bed and slept in real late the next day, almost until nine.

“I thought we had been with the pale fellows in their rocket for weeks, but the windup clock in Mr. Seaton’s room showed we were only gone two days. The barn was still smoldering.

“I was totally flummoxed when I went through Mr. Seaton’s papers. He left me a wealthy man. He had thousands of dollars in banks in New York, Philadelphia, and New Orleans. Over the next few years I used the money to hire some help and got the place fixed up better than ever.

“In ’45 news came the U.S. had annexed the Republic, which is what most people wanted all along. A widder woman who lost her husband in an Indian raid caught my eye and I took her as my wife. We had neighbors now, and when some of the people saw the books and tools that Mr. Seaton had left me, they suggested that they be used for an academy.

“We set up an academy in the first floor of the new Masonic lodge and hired a schoolmaster. With the academy and all, folks began to calling the settlement Science Hill. I reckon Mr. Seaton would’ve liked that.

"Of course, I never told no one about the rocket and the pale fellows. I never got into details. People heard stories about the barn and assumed Mr. Seaton done blowed himself up. I never told otherwise.

"My wife and I never had no children, which was probably just as well. When the war started, I was fifty-seven, but I was strong and healthy and I enlisted. I guess I always felt guilty somehow about missing Jim Bowie when he visited the ferry crossing.

"During the Battle of Chickamauga I took a minie ball clean through the chest. They laid me out to die. But three days later I got off my pallet and started the long walk home.

"Everyone said it was a miracle, but I knew when I was lying there I felt my ribs and muscles knitting up. I figured the doctoring the pale fellows done to me when I had that accident in their rocket must have stuck with me for good somehow.

"I came back to Science Hill, but a lot of other men didn't—so many that the settlement began to die. It happened in many other places. By '72 the academy had closed and the Masonic Lodge had its charter taken back.

"My wife died in '85. By then the railroad made it to Henderson County, but it ran through Athens and Eustace and skipped clear of Science Hill. That was the end of it.

"I knew by then, after having a few accidents with a knife or chisel over the years, that I healed up quick. I also saw that I was holding up well.

"Over time, everyone died or moved on, and I was left alone in Science Hill. No one noticed I was just out here by myself. I kept up the farm fine, there was enough for me to do.

"One time, when I was almost a hundred, I was at the feed store in Malakoff getting grain for the chickens. One old boy said, 'You can't be James Reid, you're too young.'

"Another old boy said, 'Don't be ignorant, you're his son, right?'

"I agreed. Nobody knew any better.

"So over the years, I've used a hair dye and chin whiskers to fool people. But in nineteen hundred and forty-two, when I was in Athens, I was buttonholed by an old boy about registering for the draft. Rather than arguing, I filled out the form, straight, birthplace and all, but I put down 1903 instead of 1803.

"I reckon those records went to the historical society after the war, which is why they have me down as a hundred now. I guess it got back to you, Mr. Editor.

"When I buried my second wife—I never told her what happened with the rocket and all—I said to myself, if I live to be one hundred, I'll never tell anyone what happened.

"Well, here I am at two hundred, so I guess it was about time to come clean, huh?

"You know, I heared the last time I was in town the folks down in Houston are ready to shoot off more rockets like they did forty years ago. I wonder if they'll run into Mr. Seaton and them pale fellows. I'd sure like to hitch a ride, and meet Mr. Seaton again, and shake his hand. Maybe I'll ask 'em to shoot me up there. Ain't nothing I ain't done before.

"Shut your mouth, son, you'll swallow something." O

# HARVEST MOON

William Barton

Of his latest tale, William Barton tells us, "The twentieth century holds a lost world, a real SF world dominated by a familiar dream of science and space, a world in which you and I might have lived, if only the mortals who ruled the world of that long-gone age hadn't been fools. This is one version of that lost world, whose bright dream was killed off by those accursed men."

I was the first man to walk on the Moon back in 1965. Nine years ago, and I'm still here, still walking.

I'd been one of the four men aboard Gemini M-1, dropping down out of a dead black sky on the western edge of that little scrap of *mare* in the northern half of the bottom of Crater Riccioli, the first of ten manned flights that would set up the Army's Moonbase over the next two years. Project Harvest Moon, the best damned impossible dream a moonstruck boy ever had, a dream I'd been dreaming at least since I was in high school, during the War, and first heard about those mysterious "flying gas mains," the V-2s falling on London.

Oh, hell, earlier than that. Since I was a kid in the thirties, reading *Amazing*, *Astounding*, all that crap, wondering if we'd see a man in space before I was dead from old age (or maybe dead a whole lot sooner in the war everyone watching the Munich Olympics said was sure to come).

Well, the War ended when I was eighteen years old, and when I was thirty-seven, I flew to the Moon, the only civilian aboard the first ship to land, getting my seat through politics, more than anything else. President Nixon told them to pick a civilian, so they picked me, not so much because I was such a hotshot planetary geologist, as because I was the one detailed to teach *them* geology, and the astronauts already knew me pretty well.

Let's take Bill. He'll be okay.

So. Thirty-seven years old, wife, teenage son, two button-cute little daughters, and there I was headed for two years' duty on the Moon, flying up with the base commander, some major from the Corps of Engineers, and a warrant officer pilot who'd've been flying Hueys in Vietnam if he hadn't been going to the Moon.



All right. You've slept as long as you're going to. Might as well get up and get started.

I stayed still, hands behind my head laced in stiff, sweaty hair, staring up through almost-dark at the criss-cross of wires eight inches from my nose, holding up the bunk above me. They'd been a wonderful improvement when the first dormcans set down. For the first few months, we'd slept in the landers, supposedly in our acceleration chairs, though most of us just curled up on the deck.

Nobody sleeps well on the Moon. Oh, maybe me, maybe not. I spend most of my time outdoors, twelve thousand hours over the past decade, the EVA Champion of the Universe, and that makes you tired enough, sometimes.

I pulled the little curtain open and slid out of my rack, the same sort of bunk you see on a nuclear submarine, bare feet on the deck, yawning, stretching, hands pressed against the upper bulkhead. Christ, I smell skunky again already. And it's five more days before my turn in the shower comes round.

Somebody in one of the other curtained-off bunks farted softly in his sleep. Great.

I got a set of coveralls out of my drawer, one of six new ones I had left, *Dunbar* neatly stenciled on every breast pocket, pulled on my felt deck shoes, turned and opened the tunnel hatch, crawled in and pulled it shut behind me. Swell. Light's burned out again. Wonder if there's any more left? How long 'til the next consumable supplies lander shows up? Two months?

Weird prickle in the back of my neck: I'll be gone by then.

Pushed open the other hatch and crawled into the messhall. It was just another dormcan, with a kitchenette and some tables, bright fluorescent tubes lining the overhead.

My old buddy Meade Patterson called out, "'bout time you gotcher ass out of bed, Dunbar! Getcher coffee so we can get going!"

"Up yours." That got me the usual bird. Hell, you got to wonder about a man in his forties still wants everyone to call him "Meat." I said, "You're just pissed off because I'm senior geologist on the planet."

He snickered, "Not for long, ole buddy."

Oh, yeah. Right. Time to hurry.

Outside, it was a bright and sunshiny day, daylight now seventy hours old, sun well above the eastern horizon, grazing-incidence reflection gone from the landscape, though the shadows were still quite long, black fingers and smears reaching away from the rubble of Moonbase.

I pushed up my gold sunvisor, so I could get a true-color look at the mooncar, and was struck by the mess we'd made of the place in only ten years. Not just the humps of buried habitats, but the trash and tracks, footprints of forty men churning up charcoal dust year in and year out. And lander stages. As far as the eye could see from ground level, lander stages. Since 1965, counting the three crashes, there had been over a hundred landings here, mostly setting down south and east of the Moonbase site, out on the *mare* part of the crater floor, ten manned, the rest supplies and hardware.

I was always glad the crashes had been just supplies, fresh fruit, fresh underpants, whatever. Imagine having to bury someone here? Imagine that.

Buckling vinyl straps over the instrument payload and the supply canisters we'd be dropping off at the observatory, Meat said, "Damn! These EVA suits are the best thing ever to come out of fucking Apollo!"

I got in the left-hand seat and started clipping carabineers to D-rings on my suit. "How about the *only* thing?" Lot of bitterness about Project Apollo on the Moon. Seemed like a good idea at the time. The Army's Project Harvest Moon would use the Gemini M/C configurations to deliver men and hardware starting in '65. Meanwhile NASA would have the time to get the kinks out of Apollo, so we could use its five-man reentry capsules and three-man landers, would get quarterly crew rotations started in 1967.

Meat got in beside me and started hooking up. "Oh, these mooncars are pretty good. Lot better than that Stirling jeep we started out with. That fucker never worked right!"

I remember when they sent up film of the fourth and last Saturn C-5 exploding in the blue sky over Florida, big, bright, orange-and-black puff-ball blossoming above the pretty white clouds, bits and pieces showering into downtown Miami, starting all those fires.

I remember thinking we should've known better, when Apollo 1 burned on the pad in January '65, killing those three NASA astronauts, but Apollo 2 flew just fine come August, and in September, me and three other guys climbed on top of a Titan IIIZ and set out for the Moon, with no way home.

They'd sent us some tape, too, of the Senate hearings in 1970, when the Army was authorized to develop Gemini R and start bringing us back.

So, meanwhile, I've been on the God-damned Moon for nine years.

Meat said, "Let's get going. Sooner we can get up there, the sooner Carl can finish talking and we can be on our way. Jeez. That boy is *nuts*!"

I slid the hand controller forward and the mooncar started rolling, wire tires flexing gently over the bumpy ground. "Oh, he's all right. You know Drake told me the both of them wanted to skip their rotation and stay on here even after the Gemini R comes on line?"

"Both of 'em are nuts."

"Maybe so."

Meat reached over and tried to clap me on the shoulder, but the Apollo suits weren't flexible enough to support that much arm rotation, so he patted my steering hand instead. "Well, you won't have to wait, buddy-boy! You'll be on your way home with the Russkis, this time next week."

My eyes went up to the black sky reflexively. Nothing. Bright sun. Blue sliver of Earth hanging perpetually seven degrees above the middle of the western horizon. But Almaz 9 had been up there for two weeks already, the fourth manned Russian spacecraft to fly around the Moon, the first one to launch atop their new UR900 superbooster, with one of those big Oryol landers aboard.

I think maybe the government wouldn't have agreed to a Russian "rescue mission," but Gemini R-1, the first unmanned test, had come down in the middle of Riccioli, making no attempt to stop, leaving nothing but a

big, bright star pattern in the dust. R-2 had worked, only a month ago, actually bringing home two tons of Lunar samples, but by then it was a done deal.

Meat said, "Ole Wild Bill, by this time next month, you'll be home, docs'll be through with you, and that old wife of yours'll be so sore she'll need a wheelchair!"

Old wife. As if we had nine years of catching up to do together? By this time, we were clear of the last layer of lander stages and space junk, and I slid the controller forward toward its stop.

Meat said, "Hey, take it easy, Wild Bill! You crash our asses, neither one of us'll ever smell pussy again."

I pulled back a little, though not before we took a good four-wheel bounce that made my teeth snap together, and said, "Meat, I ever tell you how much I hate being called 'Wild Bill'?"

He laughed, "About ten million times, Wild Bill."

From the observatory at Site 5, fifteen clicks up into the north ringwall mountains, you get a good view back downslope to the *mare* floor of Riccioli. From up here, Moonbase looks like someone emptied a car trash bag full of old soda cans and crap all over a parking lot.

I remember when they'd faxed up an illustration of the moonbase the Russians said they were going to build over at Mare Smythii, we'd all gotten a good laugh. So neat and orderly and *clean*. Compared to it, ours looked like some redneck trailer park.

The observatory itself was just a mess of hardware, antennas, and telescopes scattered around on the dirt, no blue sky, no atmosphere, no reason for a dome. The pressurized part was just a hump with an airlock door in it, where Carl and Frank dragged an inflatable shelter up here and buried it by hand, with honest-to-God *shovels*.

Nuts, all right.

There'd been some discussion about stopping them from moving up here, radiation exposure and crap, but no one wanted to put them under arrest, so . . . Sagan's voice crackled in my headphones, "Welcome to Emerald City! You got my stuff?" He was in one of the old Gemini moonsuits, of course, complete with vulcanized patches where the thing had gotten ripped, limited to ninety-minute EVAs. It'll be a long time before there's enough of the new ones to go around.

Meat said, "Where's Drake?"

Carl lifted a thumb, motioning at the shelter. "Inside soldering up a black box for the new radiotelescope project." Another gesture, at the half-assembled steerable dish we'd trucked up here in a hundred pieces over the last few months.

"You guys are taking a big risk, soldering inside a pressure tent. He burns a hole, the birm'll come down on him. All we'll be able to do is put up a marker."

He shrugged, plainly visible in the pathetic old suit. "It's our risk. We'll take it."

Meat said, "What's this new one do?"

You could see Carl's eyes brighten right through the clouded old face-

plate. "We're calling it Ozma II. Once we get the dish finished, Frank has this idea about some stuff we can look at. Tau Ceti. Maybe Epsilon Eridani . . ."

"Great, more woo-woo."

He said, "Bill, I showed you the equation."

"Yeah, you did. Half the terms are unknowns. Wishful thinking."

"Well . . . we're on the fucking *Moon*. Can you think of a better place for wishful thinking?" He waved his arms up at the dead black sky. "Christ, you can see it at night, Bill! There are *billions* and *billions* of stars out there! Surely . . ."

Meat said, "Don't call me Shirley."

"What?" He'd already been lost in his dream, ready to treat us to another half-hour diatribe, that would wind up with him riding a spaceship, not to Mars, but to Barsoom.

Meat said, "Ah, hell. Let's get this crap unloaded, so we can get on upslope and start setting out our own crap."

It was quiet in the radio shack, and private, privacy something men wanted for their monthly call home. Anyway, we'd all learned to operate the equipment and didn't need help from Moonbase's lone Signal Corps officer, who was kept busy repairing all the old junk continually wearing out and breaking down.

On the black and white TV screen, my son Billy was looking different than the last time we'd talked. He's good at this. Looking at the camera lens, not the TV screen on his end. Hard around the eyes still, though he'd been home from Viet Nam for three years, almost done with pre-med, I guess.

He said, "You trimmed your beard again."

I smiled and fluffed it with my fingers. It felt like steel wool. "Ah, it was starting to fill up my helmet."

A grin. "Well, you look more like Castro now, less like the Old Man of the Mountain."

"Where's yours?"

He rubbed his narrow, square chin, preened a skinny little Cisco Kid moustache. "They're going out of fashion. I think I may chop the pony tail next."

When he was a kid, everybody said he looked just like me; I don't think so. His chin was flatter, less cleft, nose narrower, straighter, longer, a lot more like his mother's brother Fred, if you ask me. "What the hell kind of shirt is that?" It looked like some kind of military tunic, complete with gold braid on the collar and cuffs.

He smirked. "Polyester."

"You mean like Ban-Lon?" I'd liked my Ban-Lon golf shirts.

"Nah. Stiffer."

"What color is it?"

"It's purple, Dad."

I snickered. "What, no more beads and sandals?"

"Times change."

I could see a shadow forming behind those hard eyes, even in the

grainy TV picture, and figured I'd better talk about something else. "Times change, and we are changed within them."

The eyes cleared suddenly. "Right. *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis*. Childeric, King of the Franks." We'd always had that, Billy and me, if nothing else. No matter what else was wrong, I could take my son on a walk in the woods and we could chatter about smart-guy stuff.

I said, "You still seeing that girl, uh . . ." Jesus, try hard . . . "Sarah?"

I could see he was pleased I remembered her name. "I am."

"I liked the picture you faxed up. She's real pretty." Tall blonde girl, with bright blue eyes. Kind of a big nose, but it fit her face. "How's your mother?"

A frown. A little shrug. "Doing all right, I guess. Parts manager at a tractor place now."

"That's good. Uh. She still seeing what's-his-name?"

The frown deepened. A slow nod. What do I want him to do, tell me about his little half-brother now? The kid had been born in late 1966, well before we knew I was going to be stuck on the Moon, so even if Apollo had worked . . .

I said, "School?"

A sudden brightening. "I got early admission to Johns Hopkins, Dad! UVA's graduating me a year early so I can start med school in the Fall!"

"Jesus, that's great!"

He said, "I've applied for a NASA Space Medicine Fellowship. They say with my ten veteran's preference points, I'm a shoo-in."

I'd only had five points when I got into BU in 1948. Then again, I wasn't wearing a Purple Heart, much less a Bronze Star. The Army faxed me his citation, but I still hadn't got him to talk about it. I said, "Why? I thought you were going into trauma medicine."

He nodded. "That too. The Space Medicine Fellowship requires a double major."

"I still don't understand."

"Dad, there's a lot more talk, these days, about funding Nova/Rover as a real project. Since the Russians let Dr. Chelomei publish his book last year . . ." Vladimir Chelomei, Chief Designer of Spaceships, whose Almaz 9 and Oryol 1 would be coming to carry me home, already orbiting overhead. "Target launch date of the proposed Mars Expedition One is November 12, 1984."

I said, "I'll believe that when I see it." Then, "Jesus. I'll be fifty-six years old by then."

Another slow nod. "Yeah. And I'll be thirty-four."

I'd been thirty-seven the day I left for the Moon. "And you'd like to go."

"Yeah. They'll be gone for three years. Twelve men, and they'll need a doctor. A good one."

That future started unfolding in front of me. Oh, Christ. "Sure will. We've got a field surgeon, a physician, and a pharmacist up here, three out of forty." Too old! I'll be too fucking *old*. "If it's not just a God-damned dream."

I could see those hard eyes watching me carefully. Then he said, "There's something you need to know, Dad. Last month, they finally

flight-qualified the Rover 1 nuclear rocket engine. The 75,000-pound thrust prototype is ready to go."

"The solid-core jobbie from Project NERVA?"

"Yeah."

"So...?"

"Dad, they're talking about bolting a Rover 1 on the back end of an S-IVB stage, mounting leftover equipment from the Apollo Applications Program, some of the Orbital Workshop components, on the front. There's enough Apollo/Saturn hardware left over in protected storage to fly three missions, now that they think they figured out why the rockets were blowing up. They're calling it Project Starover."

I grunted. Starover. Jack London? No, not that. Those Dig Allen Space Explorer adventures that NASA engineer had written in the early sixties, when I was training for Gemini. Joe something. Green? Was that his name? I said, "No one's going to Mars with *that* setup."

"No. Anyway, the Mars Excursion Module won't be ready before 1982, no matter how much money they throw at it. They're talking about flying precursor missions to three near-Earth asteroids, starting in 1977."

All I could do was sit there.

He smiled again, "There'll be a three-man crew for each mission. An astronaut-engineer, some kind of scientist, and a geologist."

I said, "And this is funded."

A shrug. "Almost. They won't vote on the next fiscal budget 'til Fall anyway."

"Doesn't sound like something McGovern would approve of."

"He's been pretty quiet since the impeachment hearings."

Damned hard to justify impeachment of a newly-inaugurated President, McGovern's anti-war ticket having made Bill Miller into a one-termer, despite the fine economy handed him by Nixon, but the Republicans, controlling both houses by slim margins, had tried. "Well, the hearings didn't go to the full House."

"No. You did hear Vice President Eagleton's going to resign?"

"No!"

"On the news this morning." He was tapping his temple, giving me a knowing look. Hell, there's a limit to what we can say. This is an open circuit.

"So, who...?"

"Sargent Shriver, they say."

"The Peace Corps guy?" Great, another fucking Kennedy. You gotta wonder what people are thinking, with Jack and Bobby both holding Senate seats these days, one each in Massachusetts and New York. If Teddy hadn't run his car off that bridge and drowned, there'd be three of them by now.

"They say McGovern will never run for re-election now, since he made a fool of himself trying to pull us out of Viet Nam just when we were winning."

"1976 is a long way off. Anything can happen."

He smiled. "Maybe so, but the Democrats are already talking about Ed Muskie as their nominee."

"Uh . . . Maine?"

"Yep. And the Republicans are looking at Ted Agnew."

"Who?"

"Governor of Maryland."

"Never heard of him."

He laughed. "I think he was still on the Baltimore School Board when you left for the Moon."

"Jesus." Time flies when you're stranded on another planet. "A Polack and, what? French?" Agnieux, maybe?

"Greek. If he wins it, we'll go to Mars, Dad. And in the meantime, the Republicans say they want to be true to Nixon's vision."

God damn Nixon's the one who got me stuck up here. But I didn't say that. Watch your mouth now. "So you think I should apply for this . . . Starover, when I get back home?"

"Yeah. You and Mr. Patterson are the world's *only* experienced field planetologists. It'll be you and him and a rookie."

"I don't think Meat's going to want to go anywhere again anytime soon."

He shrugged and grinned. Looked away from the camera for a second. Frowned. "Um. Time's about up."

I said, "Yeah. It's good talking to you, Billy. When you were in Nam, I missed seeing you." Missed seeing anyone, no calls from home for almost eighteen months.

"Well. I'll be back soon. I'll get them to fax you the Starover details as soon as they're available."

"Thanks. Hey, next time can you bring your sisters with you?" Millicent was almost sixteen now, little Beatrix . . . what? *Twelve*? Jesus.

His eyes softened at last. "I'll try, Dad. I'll sure try."

The picture suddenly turned to static.

Meat and I were at the turnaround point of our final traverse together, way up in the hills west of Moonbase, just below the crest of the rimwall. It's funny how little the Moon looks like the illustrations in all those science fiction magazines I read as a kid, or the movie George Pal made out of Heinlein's book *Rocketship Galileo*. What'd they called it? *Destination Moon*? I'd liked *Rocketship XM* better.

Did I really think I'd one day walk on Mars? Maybe so.

Flat lava plains, jagged mountains, untouched by wind and weather? What a laugh. We'd known enough to predict the dusty hills and low, rolling slopes of the Moon, even if we couldn't see them in telescopes. There's not much force to the solar wind, but it'd been blowing down on the mountains of the Moon for four billion years.

I snapped the big, boxy color TV camera to the top of the tripod's altazimuth mount, while Meat held it steady, trying to get it aimed back toward Moonbase, toward the edge of the wreckage field beyond, where we expected Oryol 1 to set down.

"Hold up the color card. Let's see if we can get the damn thing focused."

He rummaged in the small toolbin, found the card, and stepped back, holding it at arm's length, while I pushed up my sunvisor and leaned in to



put the clear glass of my bubble against the rubber viewfinder mount. "Heh. No perspective. Looks like you're standing on the edge of an abyss."

"You find an abyss here, lemme know."

Yeah. Real tired of *this* place. "Okay." When he was out of the way, I twisted the lens, watching the scene magnify. About a klick beyond the last old lander stage, not far from where the R-1 crashed, they'd laid out shiny scrap metal for a target, X marks the spot. I stood up.

Meat, standing with his back toward the crater, looking up toward the crest of the rim, a few hundred meters west, rising maybe fifty meters above us, said, "By this time next week, I'll be out here with that damn Russian kid."

"Musa Borodin."

"Moosa! What a name! Doesn't even sound Russian."

"You like Georgii Volynovskii better?"

"That the pilot?"

"Yeah. A two-star general."

"Christ." He turned and looked at me, pushed his own sunvisor up, so we could see each other. "I won't say I've enjoyed being stuck up here all this time, but I always liked working with you, Wild Bill. We made a good team."

I nodded. Nothing to say. And you'll be up here for at least another year, before your rotation turn comes, won't you Meat?

He smiled, maybe reading my thoughts. "Hell, Billy-boy, think of me when you give the wifey what for, huh?"

Just chit-chat. Ain't no secrets up here. When we were in college, Meade Patterson hadn't been known for his sensitivity, and he hadn't done much growing up since. So I smirked like you'd expect, and said, "Hell, Meat. It's been so long I probably don't remember how."

"Maybe it's like riding a bicycle?"

I started to say after nine years in one-sixth gee, I probably couldn't ride a bicycle either, but my eyes started to crinkle up hard. Jesus, if I start to cry in a space helmet, I won't be able to clear my vision and run the camera when the time comes. Shook my head and focused on swallowing everything.

Meat's voice softened. "Hey . . ."

I said, "Given when that little bastard of hers was born, she must've been in bed with that God-damned construction worker, *and* pregnant, less than three months after we came up here."

Meat said, "Easy, Bill. I'm sorry if I . . ."

I tried smiling. "You know, Meat, I was pretty busy the last couple of years before we left. I wouldn't be surprised if . . ."

He said, "Well, yeah. But at least you *had* a wife. You've got those three kids to go back to. You can think about grandkids for when you get old. Me, all I ever had was sluts in barrooms, and that's all I've got to go back to. And in case you forgot, I'm forty-six years old, too."

The two of us just staring at each other. "Jesus."

"Yeah."

I said, "Maybe you should reconsider applying for a berth on *Starover*?"

That got a grimace. "Not me. If I'd known I was going to be up here on

the Moon for ten years with no pussy, I wouldn't've come." He stared at me. "And I can see you would, no matter what."

I nodded.

He said, "Barroom sluts may not be much, but I miss the hell out of them. What've I got left, fifteen, twenty years before I'm an old man? I'm going to go home and fuck women until they won't have me anymore, then I'll goddam pay for it 'til I can't get it up no more."

I laughed. "Then what?"

"Then I'll sit around and remember all the pussy I had 'til they shovel dirt in my face."

"Hell, Meat, the Starover missions are only going to be a few months long!"

"Yeah? Well, this one was only supposed to be two years. I was supposed to be home by '68." Another long look. "You think they might let you go to Mars with your kid, don't you, you silly bastard?"

I looked away, back toward Riccioli and the Moonbase mess, like some kid's toys in a dirty sandbox. Almost time. "It's a long shot."

"You think about what it'd be like to see your kid die on Mars right in front of you?"

"I thought about what it'd be like to sit home and drink beer and watch him die on TV." That shut us both up. I switched over to the base's general frequency, and said, "Base? Traverse 2271. We're all set."

Jilson the Signal Corps officer's voice crackled in my headphones, "Roger, Traverse. Switch to 778. We've set up a patch to the Soviets' ground-to-orbit. You'll be able to hear the Oryol/Almaz traffic."

"Can they hear us?"

Jilson laughed. "No. It ain't *magic*, Dunbar. It's wires on my console."

"Ho-ho. Plagioclase in *your* sock come Christmas, bucko!"

"Not from *you*, my boy."

No, not from me. I told Meat, then turned my comm dial to the new frequency. "Hear anything?"

"Nope."

"Maybe they're not really up there."

"Maybe we're not really on the Moon."

Jilson said, "There's some guy down in New York getting a lot of TV time, claiming there's no Moonbase, and no forty Americans stuck on the Moon. Claims we faked it, to fake out the Russians."

Meat said, "Damn right! This is fucking Nevada! Hey, you guys wanna go over to Reno tonight after work? I hear there's this place called the Mustang Ranch . . ."

Jilson said, "Open circuit, Meat. They're going to put everything on national TV, starting about two minutes before touchdown."

"Er. Sorry."

I got behind the camera, putting myself in position, elevating it slightly, so the viewfinder showed black sky and a scrap of horizon, looking almost white by contrast, though moonsoil is very nearly black. "What a waste of color."

"I heard the Russian exhaust is a kind of orange-violet."

"Hydrazine." I was outside when R-1 crashed. It was pretty while it

lasted, a hemisphere of transparent bluish fire that expanded and dissipated in an eyeblink.

Jilson said, "Azimuth one degree. Thirty seconds. They'll go high gate less than fifteen seconds after they come over the horizon, so be ready."

"Roger that." I lowered the camera to take in more horizon, hoping I was aimed for the right spot, over the far crater wall, well south of my own position. "Keep an eye peeled, Meat. If you see a dot of light, sing out."

"Right."

There.

"Bill!"

"I see 'em." Just a white fleck, kind of wavering, rising over the horizon. Not really rising. Coming toward us in a flat trajectory across the landscape. And, in the earphones, someone said, "Da, khorosho. Kuda mne itti napravo ili palevo?"

Not a word. I'd taken Latin in high school and German in college, of course. Practically nobody was taking Russian in the forties. But the voice sounded as if it were, I dunno. Puzzled?

Meat said, "That's strange . . ."

Another voice said, "Idite pryamo." Sounding a little nervous maybe.

The first voice said, "*Shto?*"

The second voice, suddenly louder, sharper, words coming very fast: "Vtaroi povorot naprava!"

Meat said, "Jesus! Uh . . ."

The image in the viewfinder was more than just a wavering splotch of fire now. Four spidery legs sticking out of pastel flame, two of them pointing up at the sky. I muttered, "More'n fifteen *seconds*, I think . . ."

The first voice, almost panicky, said, "Ya zabludilsya . . ."

I had to tip the camera back sharply to keep them from going out of the top of the picture. Suddenly realized I could see the body of the lander beyond the flame, two bulgy, baggy greenish spheres stacked one on top of the other. I pulled my face out of the viewfinder and looked. "Holy shit!"

Jilson said, "You're losing them, Bill."

I went back to the viewfinder, as the same panicky voice said, "Eta ochen stranno . . . Ya . . . ya . . . Idite vperyot! *Pzhalst* . . ."

I realized the camera was at its backstop, pointing as close to straight up as it could get.

Meat said, "Jesus, guys! Punch out!"

When I let go of the camera, it started tipping over, and I let it fall, turning, looking . . . "My God!" Oryol was sailing right overhead, maybe two hundred meters away, looking big as an airliner. The fire . . . suddenly it guttered, throwing off little streamers of orange and pink, then went out, and smaller sparks twinkled here and there.

RCS jets. The ship started tipping forward, trying to come upright. Getting in position to abort, get the hell out of here.

One of the Russian voices shouted, "*Bozhe. . . !*" Then, very much quieter, "Gde mne slezt? Pozhaluista otkroite okno—"

There was a flare of sparks as Oryol hit the crest of the rimwall, then nothing. Darkness. And, of course, silence.

From over by the mooncar, Meat, looking at our instrument package,

said, "Interesting. Two big seismic events, and three smaller ones. No aftershocks." He looked over at me. "You know, he made a joke, right there at the end."

I shook my head, looking up at the rimwall. You could barely see the little scuff where they hit, and I wondered just how many little bitty pieces of my ride home we'd be finding on the slope beyond.

I stood the camera tripod back up, started pulling plugs, unclipping fittings, putting stuff away. Nothing. Nothing. *Now* somebody's buried on the Moon. Funny how, despite everything, nobody'd ever died outside the Earth's atmosphere before. Oh, sure, Komarov died when Voskhod 6 crashed in '67, almost two years to the day after the Apollo 1 crew burned on the pad, but what killed him was running into Kazakhstan at four hundred miles an hour.

I remembered the Russians had been having a bad time, during the year after Sergei Korolyov died on the operating table, while Mishin and Glushko struggled to take control, fighting each other, every step of the way. First the Voskhod 4/5 rendezvous and docking mission failed so badly, then the Komarov crash. For a while, it looked like they were done, and we were all startled when Almaz 1 rode Chelomei's UR500 to low Earth orbit toward the end of 1968. Space station, we said. Until they put one around the Moon, three years later.

Jilson's voice crackled in my headset, "Guys? The Almaz pilot says he's still getting telemetry from Oryol." Somewhere in the black sky overhead, Valeri Bykovskii would be flying by himself, looking at his consoles, and realizing he'd be going home alone.

Meat said, "Voice?"

"No. Just engineering data."

I said, "Didn't you guys look at the *Pravda* diagram they faxed up last week? Voice and biomed go through the ascent stage high-gain. Everything else is through omnidirectional stub and whip antennas." I turned and looked up at the ridge crest. Though they were fresh, and wouldn't change for geologic ages, I still had a hard time spotting the little scars where they'd clipped the ground.

Jilson said, "Pilot says it's baseline ascent guidance data. He says they apparently had a staging event after they bounced off the mountaintop . . . uh, no way to tell if it was triggered by the impact or by their on-board computer. Says they'd initiated the abort guidance system command sequence, but . . ."

Meat said, "Boy, I wouldn't want to fly with a Russian computer."

"I wouldn't want to fly with one of ours, these days." The Gemini Rs were using a modified Apollo diskey computer, early sixties technology at its best, but a couple of months ago, Billy'd held up his new Rockwell calculator, sung me the "big green numbers" song and told me how much it cost. I'd told him to get me one as a coming-home present.

Looking down at the charge gauge on the mooncar console, I said, "We've got just about enough juice to make the top of the ridge and still get back to base. You guys listening?"

Meat got in the passenger side and started clipping his D-rings. "Let's go."

Jilson said, "Right. Stay line of sight, Bill."

From the top of the rimwall ridge, you could see Oryol on the slope beyond, in the beginnings of the Hevelius Formation, a jumble of Mare Orientale ejecta, all cracks and crags, that was one of the main reasons Moonbase was sited at Riccioli. Somebody'd thought they'd spotted outgassing here back in the fifties, and imagined there might be a volcano somewhere. Of course, that was back when people were still arguing about the origins of Arizona's Coon Mountain. They call it Meteor Crater now, and there aren't any volcanoes on the Moon.

Meat said, "Eight, maybe ten clicks? Good thing they're out of the rimwall shadows. We'd never spot 'em otherwise."

Jilson said, "What d'you see? You're still on open mike, guys."

"Right." So try not to say *fuck* too much. Some congressdork might not like it. I said, "The ascent stage looks intact in binoculars. Lying on its side, of course. No sign of the descent stage."

Meat pointed off to one side, and said, "I'd say that bright scar over there might be it."

"There's some debris scattered around. Too small to identify, kind of in an arc between the ascent stage and the explosion scar, if that's what it is."

Meat said, "You see those ripples up slope of the mess? Looks like they rolled for a while."

I panned around, looking at little sparks and twinkles of torn metal. "I see the high gain antenna. Maybe five hundred meters from the intact crew cabin."

Jilson, voice sharp: "*Intact?*"

"Well. Not broken into pieces." I put the binoculars back on the thing and tried focusing carefully. "Too damn many scratches on these lenses. These are the ones I brought up in '65." I turned my aim carefully, getting Oryol into the clearest patch of glass. "The green thermal blanket is torn, but I can make out the hull underneath. Not well enough to see if it's cracked."

Meat said, "These Russian pressure vessels are a lot tougher than ours. They use a full one-atmosphere environment."

"So if they get a puncture, there's all that much more force exerted on a potential tear?"

"Well."

I walked back to the mooncar and looked at the gauge again. "We got enough juice to drive down there and maybe get three-quarters of the way back up the rimwall."

There was a long silence, then Jilson said, "Guys? We've had President McGovern on the horn. He says it's your call."

Meat said, "That figures."

I got back into my seat, and said, "Meat?"

"Yep."

"Okay. Jilson, you guys have two charged-up mooncars down there. Bring 'em on up to the ridge line. Just sing out when you're line of sight."

Long silence, then he said, "Roger that."

Meat said, "Time we went, Wild Bill?"

I said, "If you're going to call me that, you have to be Andy Devine, and your line is, 'Hey, Wild Bill, wait for me!'"

Jilson laughed nervously in our earphones.

It was a relatively easy drive down, there are few slopes greater than fifteen or twenty degrees anywhere on the Moon, and we managed to get within a kilometer or so of the wreck of Oryol before we had to stop, parking at the edge of one of those few.

Standing at the precipice, looking down into the dark, Meat said, "We were right on top of it before it looked like anything but a shadow. Good thing we were going slow."

Good thing. You could see that little story playing out, like the famous scene from that James Dean movie, and me with no comb to hold in my teeth as we fell.

It'd been a little dicey driving in the deep shade, and I'm always afraid machinery will seize up in the cold. We have to spend two weeks out of every month holed up in the birmed shelters as it is, and usually wait until the sun's been up for a dozen hours or so before we try to start anything that might break. Give the graphite lubricant time to thaw out.

The mess below us, kind of a big crack, with a jumble of huge rocks beyond, was one of the "vents" that made the astronomers think there might be a volcano here, just a big pile of rubble, kilometers deep, tossed from the Orientale impact, eons ago. No more than a void in the regolith, that's all. Oh, maybe they didn't imagine that "outgassing." Maybe there's old cometary ice under the ejecta blanket. Maybe it gets crushed and heated by moonquakes from time to time. But there'd been decent-sized moonquakes while I was here to watch, and I'd never seen a damned thing.

Meat was pointing off to our right, northward along the ledge, toward a big area of bright rock, where the topsoil seemed to be gone. "Maybe they clipped the edge and bounced over?"

Just beyond it, the crevice narrowed, turned to a crack and disappeared under dark gray dirt. I said, "We'll need the Hasselblad, I guess, all the lanyards and wire rope . . ."

He pushed up his sunvisor, looking at me. "You really think we can make it across that?" A gesture, at the jumbled boulder field between us and the crash site.

I wanted to shrug inside the suit, shook my head instead. "One of us, at least."

"Nice try." He walked back to the mooncar and started pulling lines and cable out of the bin, and said, "Let's clip together with the twelve-footer."

"Right. I'll take the camera."

We started walking, staying far enough apart to keep the lanyard from dragging on the ground, stopping every now and again so I could shoot a picture. Sixty frames on this roll. I need to keep count.

After we cleared the end of the crevice and started down toward the broken rocks, Meat said, "I sure as hell am glad we're not in those old Gemini suits."

"Yeah. Gotta give those Apollo guys credit, at least they watched us on TV and figured out they'd be falling down a lot."

On foot and unplugged from the extended-EVA subsystem of the mooncar, the Apollo suit portable life support system can manage about seven

hours on its own. It took us three hours to walk the last kilometer to Oryol, climbing over the scree below the so-called vent.

I guess we stood there for a good three minutes, just staring at the thing, me thinking how much more like real spaceships these Russian vehicles looked than ours. This one was on its side, two big spheres, maybe eight feet in diameter, made of some dark-painted metal, originally shrouded by green quilting that looked like it had pink attic insulation stuffing exposed where it was ripped, which was most everywhere. There was a canister on one end, an obvious docking drogue, and a big cone on the other, fat end clamped to one of the spheres, little end pointing away, showing the muzzle of a small rocket engine. There was a little window on the lower sphere, a small porthole really, and it was dark inside.

Finally, Meat said, "You'd think it'd be hard to fly without windows."

I said, "They use TV. Can you read the Russian printed on the hull? I can sort of sound out the Cyrillic characters, but ..."

"Nah. I took Russian-for-Lit as my main non-science elective sequence. No technical vocabulary. All I can do is talk like Stinking Lizaveta."

"Hmm?"

"Never mind."

I pointed to a recessed T-handle, next to which was printed a big black arrow. "*Spaseniye*. Rescue?"

"I don't remember. It's a noun, I think."

I started to reach for it, hesitated, feeling my fingers cramp. Sure. What then? Hatch pop open, or is it explosive bolts? And what happens if the hatch hits you in the helmet? I turned and looked at the other sphere. "Maybe we can unseat the drogue and get in through the docking adaptor."

Meat pointed. "The airlock hatch has a handle on the outside."

"Yeah. No keyhole, either."

He snickered. "I don't imagine it locks. Still, you'd think it'd have a big lever, like ours."

"Russian hatches open inward." Ours don't. We'd always relied on having the latches work. Or we had, anyway. Apollo 1's hatch opened inward, just like in a science fiction story, which was why those three guys were toast.

Meat stepped forward, reached up, turned and pulled. Nothing.

"Inward."

"Oh. Right." And when he pushed, it opened on darkness. No air, then.

I took hold of the upper hatch rim, and pulled myself up, reached in and grabbed some boxy thing just inside, tried to go through, bumped everywhere all at once. Maybe Russian PLSS backpacks are littler'n ours? "Shit. Can you guide me in?"

He said, "Lemme grab you by the legs. Just hold on. If I turn you just so ..."

I slid through the hole, suddenly filling up the space inside. Belatedly clicked on my helmet light. It was big for the inside of a spaceship, an American ship anyway, where you barely had room to sit, much less turn around, but full of clutter, lockers and control panels bolted haphazardly around the inside of the sphere, wherever there wasn't a hatch.

Meat said, "Anything?"

"Hang on. I'm going to try to open the hatch to the command module."



There was an L-handle, like on a cheap screen door. Turn. Pull. Nothing. Think. It's an airlock. Pressure equalization valve? There was a knob next to the hatch. When I twisted it, seemed like a little dust flew out. Okay. When I pulled the handle this time, the hatch swung open toward me, revealing a circular space beyond, maybe ten inches deep, with another hatch on the other side.

"Well?"

I said, "The CM hatch has a handwheel. I, uh . . ."

"What?"

"There was pressure in the tunnel. If there's pressure in the CM . . ."

He said, "And what if they're not in suits?"

"Right."

"What are our options?"

"None."

"Well, then."

Laconic, like Hemingway heroes. I said, "They're probably dead anyway."

"Yup."

I found the valve and twisted. Nothing. Held my hand over the little hole, but could sense no pressure. I said, "I can't tell, Meat. I'll just open it up."

He said, "Anyway, if there was air in there, there ain't no more."

"Right." Spun the handwheel. Nothing. I gave the hatch a push and it fell open on a dark space, my helmet's wan light glinting off irregular surfaces. There was a flat control panel, above it, two acceleration couches bolted to the vertical surface beyond, strapped into them, neatly folded up, two motionless bodies in spacesuits.

I said, "Christ."

"Dead, are they?"

I slid through the tunnel, leaning toward them, getting my knees through, then my feet, bracing myself so I was heads up. The guy on the left had a star pattern on his faceplate, with a long sinuous crack leading away from it. Inside was a pale, clean-shaven man with a lot of black freckles on his face, eyes shut, as though sleeping ever so peacefully. I pulled back, looking at the nametag on the suit. "Bojib-something . . . Cyrillic. Idiot. "Volynovskii, I guess."

"Dead?"

"Yeah." Not freckles at all. Petechiae. "Looks like something let the air out before we got here, anyway."

"No surprise. What about Borodin?"

I leaned to the right and looked in through the faceplate, my light picking out a boyish face with a big, dark gooseneck over one eye, a smear of blood coming off one corner of his moustache. His eyes were shut, but not quite all the way, showing just a sliver of white. "Mmmm . . . no crack in the faceplate."

"Well, they sure as hell got banged around."

"Yeah." I reached out and took him by one shoulder, giving it a squeeze. Felt a hard pang in my chest as his lids fluttered, dark brown eyes rolling, suddenly seeming to find my face against the light.

Meat said, "Bill?"

Borodin's lips worked slowly, mouthing something.

I leaned in, putting my bubble against his faceplate, just like in the movies, and heard that faint, tinny, bottom-of-the-well voice say, "Thanks, Yank. I knew you'd come." His eyes rolled up, and he seemed to slump in the suit.

"Bill?"

I looked around. "Jesus!"

"The other one alive?"

"Yeah. There's a rip in his suit sleeve, though. He managed to get a tourniquet in place before he blacked out."

Meat whistled softly, then said, "There's a coldpatch kit on the moon-car."

"If he lives that long."

I started unbuckling his seat harness.

I'd been up for about forty hours by the time all was said and done, tireder'n fuck, but unwilling to sleep, lie down, eat, anything. Just sat there in my longjohns in the med module, looking at the tear sheets mission control faxed up.

The *Washington Post* headline just said, "Russian Saved," and had pictures of Borodin and Volynovskii above the fold. Nice pictures. Russian publicity photos of two handsome boys in their neat dress uniforms. The *Evening Star* said, "Cosmonaut Rescued on Moon," and had one of my photos of Oryol 1's ascent stage lying on its side. The photo credit said, "Courtesy U.S. Army."

The *Daily News*, being the cheap tabloid that it is, said, "American Heroes!" and had pictures of me and Meat. Unfortunately, it was our Project Harvest Moon publicity photos, the two of us still in our early thirties, in dark suits, with skinny 1962-style ties looking like a couple of black ribbons, Meat with his crewcut, me with my black hair slicked straight back so everyone could admire my widow's peak. My suit, I remembered, had been navy blue.

I looked away, my eyes feeling like they were full of moondust. Go to bed, you God-damned fool. Looked back at the pictures again, and wondered how much they'd help, when I asked for my next assignment. Felt obscurely ashamed for wondering.

Heard Meat's voice in my head, snickering, "It's how the world works, Wild Bill." Looked at my watch and realized we'd been back for six hours already.

The partition to the operating theater accordioned back and Micky Linville ducked through. Dr. Linville had been forty-seven when we came up here, the oldest man on the Moon, a full bird-colonel thinking to round out his last two years of service in Outer Space and go out in a blaze of glory. Now he'll be retired as a three-star general.

I said, "So."

He wiped his face, looking exhausted. "He's awake. Asked to see you."

"Me specifically?"

He smiled, "By name? He just wants to see the guy with the gray beard filling up his helmet."

I rubbed the thing. "Jeez. You know, I don't know whether to cut it off or take it home with me."

"Come on. He needs to get back to sleep."

"Right."

Borodin was on the table, covered with a worn old sheet, clean white bandages around his chest and shoulder, wrapping the stump where his left arm had been. I couldn't help glancing at the plastic garbage bag on the floor nearby, at the suggestive shape inside. His arm? Or maybe just rolled-up bloody towels.

I flinched away, and when I looked at his face, the dark eyes were open, looking at me, skin pale as paper, grayish lips smiling through the mustache. "How you doing?"

He tried to shrug, winced, smiled again, and said, "Don't speak Russian?"

"Sorry."

"That's okay. Sorry we can't take you home now."

"I guess I'll be taking you instead."

You could see a momentary shadow cross behind his face, quickly pushed away. Right. When R-3 splashes down in the Pacific, this boy is home for good. I suddenly realized I was glad to be here, despite the years, that'd I'd do it again, that I wouldn't mind coming back.

Worth it then? Really worth it?

Maybe so.

I said, "You get some sleep. We'll see you in the morning."

He reached out and touched my hand briefly, "Yes. And you." And said, Bolshoi-something, like he was talking about the ballet. "Bolshoye spasebo," maybe.

There was a lot of static in the little black-and-white TV screen, solar activity gradually increasing over the years as we moved from minimum to maximum, but I could see Billy grimace. "Where's your beard, Dad?"

I said, "Somebody told me they were out of style on Earth. Don't you think it makes me look younger?"

A level stare for a few seconds, then he said, "Maybe once you put on a little weight."

I'd been startled by all the lines that'd been hiding under my beard all these years. That and the fact that I was fishbelly white, from having been either indoors or hiding behind a UV-opaque faceplate for the past decade.

He said, "You get all the forms I faxed up?"

"Yeah. I was thinking of bringing them back in R-3. Handing 'em in in person."

A frown. "Fax them back today, Dad."

"Uh . . ." Trying to tell me something? "All right. As soon as we're done."

He said, "There's more news."

"Yeah?"

"They approved the Grand Tour. And the Voyager unmanned Mars probes."

"Wow!"

A slow nod. "They think the Democrats are going to take back the Senate this fall, and Muskie will be Majority Leader. Since you and Mr. Patterson saved that Russian, the space program's popular again. Even McGovern says it's worth doing."

I said, "Imagine that."

"Dad, maybe you shouldn't underestimate what this could be worth to you."

"I'll try not to blow it, Billy."

His face suddenly brightened and softened. "Well, another surprise . . ." He got up and moved out of the stationary frame.

A young woman sat down in his place, very pretty, with a heart-shaped face, tip-tilted nose, dark almond eyes, wavy hair I knew was chestnut brown. Not smiling. She stared at me, then said, "Hello, Dad."

I sat back hard in my chair. "Millicent."

She said, "It's Millie, Dad. Nobody calls me 'Millicent.'"

"Sorry. Jesus, you look great! All grown up."

She looked away, at someone out of the frame, and I thought, a total stranger. Maybe always a stranger. I remember when she was little wondering about the hair and eyes, the little nose. Her mother and I both had black hair, green eyes, long noses, and this little changeling . . . well, sixteen now.

She looked back, obviously uncomfortable, and said, "There's someone else to see you."

"Millie . . ."

But she got up anyway. Long, empty moment, then another little girl, skinny as a stick, with long black hair, green eyes just like mine, long nose, one hand holding a cane, so very awkward as she sat, wincing briefly, then giving me the biggest grin. "Daddy!"

"Oh, Beatrix." I had to clench my teeth for a moment. "Is it Bea, now?"

She smirked at someone out of frame. "Beatrix, Daddy! I *love* my name." More big smile, "Besides, anybody tries to call me 'Aunt Bea' . . ." She lifted the cane, miming a crack on the head. *Ant Bee*. Christ. Is that show still popular?

I said, "How's your back, kiddo?"

The smile didn't falter, maybe remembering how I'd called her that when she was little. Maybe not. "As good as it's going to get." Then, before I could go on, "It'll be *great* to have you home again!"

She was just shy of four years old when I left. Is it *me* she wants home, or just any father at all? Well. There's the little brother. And our friend the construction worker. Softly, I said, "It'll be great to *be* home, Beatrix. I've missed you all." Maybe a little scrap of time to see her grow up? Uh. Yeah. But Starover 1 will be leaving in 1977. I'll be a busy little beaver for the next four-five years. And if . . . and if . . .

She looked away, seeming dismayed, then back. "Billy says time's getting short. I love you, Daddy!"

She struggled to her feet, moving out of the frame, while I swallowed a hard lump. Her brother leaned in, head sideways in the image. "One more visitor, Dad."

"Hello, Bill."

I don't know why I didn't expect it, but I didn't.

Bushwhacked.

Hard to tell in the crappy TV picture, but she seemed a lot thinner, a hell of a lot older than the last time I'd seen her, the night before launch, when they'd let the wives into the barracks for a couple of hours, violating quarantine. "Hello, Harriet. How've you been?"

A long frown, a look away.

Unhappy. Is someone else out there too? A little boy, maybe seven years old, and a beefy, red-faced man?

She said, "I'm all right."

I smiled, "You going to be there when I get home?"

I could see her swallow. "President McGovern's flying us out to the *Enterprise* when you land. You're the first American to come home from the Moon."

I nodded. And then what? Then what, wife of mine? Little boy coming too, or will you leave him home with the construction worker? My home. My bed. My life.

I said, "I'll see you then. Maybe we'll talk."

"I . . ." She looked down, away from both the camera lens and the TV screen. "It's almost time. I have to go. I'll . . . I'll see you soon." She stood, stepped off camera, and was gone.

Billy gave me a long look. What the hell were you expecting? I said, "Thanks, son."

A nod, then he said, "Fax those papers down, Dad. It's important."

"Right. Be seeing you." And thought, some of his Viet Nam buddies will have been in the same boat. He must know, understand. Right? I got up and went to fill out my mission application forms.

The voice in my headphones, Jilson's, crackled, "R-3? T-minus three minutes and counting." In the olden days, the early days of the Project Adam flights, the Army flight controllers had said X-minus in the countdown, a holdover from the days of the big-gun artillery, but they switched to "T" at the start of the Gemini A flights in 1962.

"Roger, Moon. Minus three." Jesus. Sweaty. Itchy. I hadn't been in my old Gemini suit since the first Apollo EVA gear came up, three years ago. Baggy. Wrinkled. Sticky inside.

I glanced over at Borodin, pale and staring in his borrowed suit, much newer than mine, one sleeve rolled up and tied off. Grinned. "You okay?"

He smiled back. "Horrorshow . . . Comrade Command-Pilot."

A joke. A literary reference. Either he's not as nervous as he looks, or he's whistling past the graveyard. Well, I'm sure this tin can seems mighty flimsy to a man who's flown in an Almaz, or survived a balls-up crash landing on the Moon.

These Gemini Rs are a lot different from the M I flew up in. More cramped inside. No airlock, for Christ's sake. You just depress the reentry capsule and climb on in, sit in your seat, slam the door, and turn on the air.

A different voice, with a lot more static, said, "R-3? Telemetry says you haven't reset your breaker panel yet. Page seventy-four in the manual."

"Uh, roger, Flight, wilco." I turned to the right page, reached up and started flipping switches to the indicated positions. Looked at Borodin, "First time for everything, right, pal?"

He looked a little sick. Looked away from me, out through the hatch porthole at the lunar surface he'd never see again.

"Two minutes, R-3."

"Roger, Moon."

Will I ever see it again? How lucky do I have to get?

Lucky enough.

Even the inside of the control room was changed, back in the direction of the old Gemini A, lacking the rear hatch implemented in the B model, continued in the M. An integral heat shield, ceramic over titanium, they said, able to withstand direct reentry at translunar velocity. No skip-lob. No aerobraking. No chance of winding up a meteor, or, worse, a manned interplanetary probe . . .

"One minute."

"Roger, Moon."

No more forward docking tunnel, either, and no more little rendezvous windows. Just a round porthole in the hatch, and a big TV screen at our feet, for "approach-and-landing."

The other voice said, "R-3? You need to be on page 212, beginning at Roman numeral one."

"Roger, Flight." Turned to the right page and started looking over the instructions. Flip this, twist that. Read something else. If such and such, go to page nine hundred, Roman numeral LXXVII, see "Abort to Lunar Surface."

Well.

"Thirty seconds."

"Roger. See you later, Jilson."

"In about three months, Bill."

"Right."

I glanced at Borodin. Eyes still open. Not too green around the gills. How would I feel if I was going home in a Russian spacecraft, leaving my best friend and my left arm behind on the Moon?

Bykovskii was still orbiting overhead, had lowered his pericyynthion to around 50,000 feet, and would try to film our liftoff. Hope it works out. I'd like to see that someday.

Jilson said, "Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . ."

Felt my heart suddenly speed up like mad, trying not to imagine what an "abort to lunar surface" might be like. Hell, Borodin already knows.

"Three . . . two . . . one . . ."

Something thumped behind my back. I looked up, out through the hatch porthole in time to see a big splash of brilliant yellow sparks flying up and away, then the lunar surface dropped, like the ground seen from one of those elevators they sometimes stick on the outsides of big buildings.

"Holy shit!"

I could feel myself sinking into the seat, arms and legs like lead. Glanced at the accelerometer. It said, point-eight gee. Great.

Jilson, sounding nervous, said, "Everything okay, Bill?"

"Yeah. What a ride! You'll love it!"

I glanced over at Borodin. Eyes shut, mouth open slightly. Fainted? Hope his stump's not bleeding again. That's all we need.

"R-3? Telemetry shows you haven't done Roman numeral eight yet. Turn the page and try to stay focused."

"Roger, Flight."

When I couldn't see the control panel and the manual at the same time, I picked the book up, holding it overhead, and started flipping switches and taking readings, just the way the checklist said.

Well. It just feels funny. I'll get used to being heavy again.

When I looked out the window next, there was nothing but black sky. The TV screen, however, showed only Moon, shrinking Moon, full of craters and rilles, starkly lit up by brilliant sunshine, slowly rocking back and forth as we flew higher and faster, up and away.

Homeward bound.

I put the book back in my lap, and thought, if I can get out through the hatch under my own steam, stand on my own two feet on *Enterprise's* flight deck, shake President McGovern's hand, smile and wave to the TV cameras . . .

I could see that future unfold all the way, if only I had the will to make it so. Starover 1 to a near-Earth asteroid. And maybe, just maybe, they'd let a fifty-six year old planetary geologist . . .

I could picture that, too, standing on Mars with my son.

That one bright dream.

Worth all the rest of it?

That loss of everything else you once dreamed about?

That home, family, security, love?

Maybe so.

The ascent engine shut down with a gassy thump, leaving us in sudden silence, and I was on my way. ○

### Author's Note:

**A**s with most so-called *Alternate History*, everything in this story is "possibly true," in the sense that at least the kernel of the thing existed in our real timeline. How these things would have played out is a matter of conjecture, bordering on fantasy.

"Harvest Moon" is based on a 1959 Army feasibility study called *Project Horizon*, initially known as *Project Mountain Top*, which called for the construction of a space station and permanent moonbase in the mid 1960s, using technology then under development. It proposed using a conceptual Saturn vehicle, consisting of a Saturn C-1 first stage, with a Titan ICBM booster as the second stage, and a Centaur third stage to land small cargo packages on the Moon, with men following in a two-man vehicle using the Earth-orbit rendezvous technique. It would've required hundreds of launches, at an average rate exceeding sixty per year. And, oh yes, Hori-



zon included a return capability from the start. There was also a real Project Adam, proposed by the Army Ballistic Missile Agency, and it sort of really flew, as the two Mercury-Redstone suborbital missions of 1961.

The real Project Gemini was remotely descended from the Air Force's Project MISS of the 1950s, MISS standing in Phase I for Man in Space Soonest, and in Phase II for Man in Space Sophisticated. In the story, Gemini A is our Gemini, which flew ten missions in 1965-1966. Gemini B is based on the Manned Orbiting Laboratory, whose hardware was actually built, but never flown. The real MOL was considerably heavier than what I describe here. Gemini C and M are the B variant stripped of reentry hardware and mounted on a hypothetical lunar descent stage. Gemini T is based on the "Big Gemini" proposal put forward when it looked like Apollo might never fly. Gemini R is a hodge-podge of MOL and Apollo LM hardware.

I think everyone of a certain age will remember the Air Force's X-20 DynaSoar, a reusable spacecraft proposed to be launched atop a Titan II ICBM. There was an unmanned version called Asset that really flew, and these, along with various lifting-body testbeds, were ancestral to the Space Shuttle.

The Titan IIIZ of the story is based on the Titan IIIC, a Titan II ICBM with two strap-on segmented solid rocket motors, and a transtage whose engines were the same ones used in the Apollo Lunar Module. The IIIZ comes from a proposal to build a much bigger version, by scaling the Titan tankage from ten to fifteen feet diameter, and bolting on four solids. The US really did build nuclear rocket engines under the aegis of Project NERVA. The Rover 1 engine, with 75,000 lbs. thrust, was ready for flight testing in 1973, but the program was canceled.

In our timeline, Project Apollo succeeded partly because a certain German engineer politicked to have his brainchild become the American space program, but mostly because it was associated with a certain American president who was murdered in public.

The Soviets, on the other hand, really did have multiple, competing space programs, including two complete, hardware-and-everything Moon projects. When Korolyov died in 1966, the Russians had a chance to recognize the technical superiority of Chelomei's Moon / Mars program, and go with it. Instead, Mishin was allowed to fumble what Korolyov left behind, and to be displaced by Glushko, who spent a Moon program's worth of money building Buran, which flew once, unmanned, in 1988. Chelomei was taken off space work, and his Almaz / TKS spaceships were used as "military" Salyuts. On the other hand, while Korolyov's N-1 died in a series of spectacular explosions, while Glushko's Energiya wound up so much scrap metal, Chelomei's UR500 continues to fly. We know it as the Proton, one of the most reliable space launch vehicles ever built.

One more thing: there was a real Project Harvest Moon. In the early 1970s, a group of private investors proposed to buy an Apollo / Saturn V stack from one of the canceled missions, fly it with borrowed NASA astronauts, and profit from the sale of moonrocks. One of the more interesting parts of the proposal was to erect a dome on the Moon, fill it with moonsoil, air, plants, and animals, and leave it behind to be observed by remote-controlled cameras.

That would've been cool.

### The Shepard Is My Lord

Lucius Shepard had an astonishing year in 2004. Four books with his byline on them appeared, from four different small-press publishers. Each was different in flavor and tone, although all shared the ineffable, unique Shepard touch. Here's a consideration of the quartet.

*Two Trains Running* (Golden Gryphon Press, hardcover, \$22.95, 112 pages, ISBN 1-930846-23-1) is surely the most eclectic of all the offerings before us. It consists of a long essay, a novella, and a short story, all centering around the lives of what used to be called, in simpler times, "bindlestiffs." In 1998, Shepard wrote a piece for *Spin* magazine on the then-current "hobo" scene. That essay, "The FTRA Story," much expanded here, is a fine piece of "new journalism" with the requisite personal slant, finding Shepard himself riding the rails in search of the reality behind the media hype. His empathy with these outcasts, whether exiled by society or by their own demons, and his insights into the milieu are first-rate and suspenseful.

This experience led directly to the writing of "Over Yonder" and "Jailbait." The former finds a group of hobos occupying an alternate reality akin to the paradise of Big Rock Candy Mountain—but with all the constraints and strictures that their old interpersonal relations entail. The latter piece is more mimetic, and charts the uneasy bonding of an older man and a young woman. In both pieces, Shepard's trademark bravura plotting, luscious language, and por-

traits of despairing seekers conspire to create unforgettable stories. This whole book has an Ellisonian ring to it, with the fiction flowing so cleanly out of the lived days, and is a testament to Shepard's continual seeking after new forms and inspirations.

By contrast, the novel *Viator* (Night Shade Books, hardcover, \$25.00, 196 pages, ISBN 1892389-44-4) rests firmly and brilliantly in an early-Ballard mode. It stands as cousin to such Ballard masterpieces as *The Drowned World* (1962) and other tales of obsessive protagonists penetrating the borders of consensus reality.

First off, Shepard conjures up a metaphorically transcendent *mise-en-scene*. Twenty years before the story opens, a large cargo ship named the *Viator* was deliberately run aground, for reasons unknown, on the coast of Alaska, near the small town of Kaliaska. The force of the grounding was such as to drive the ship nearly entirely onto land. Now it sits, surrounded by overgrown greenery, a vessel journeying nowhere. Onto this ship are placed five men, all eccentrics, with the ostensible goal of professionally gauging how much of the ship is worthy of salvage at this late date. The experts are led by one Thomas Wilander, himself a sorry case. Not without intelligence, Wilander has reached the end of his personal road of failure, and has taken this job as a last resort, at the behest of a mysterious employer named Jochanan Lunde. Now Wilander alternates his time between riding herd over his crew and visiting a woman named Arlene

in Kaliaska, a woman with whom he's gradually falling in love. But the *Viator* is a suitor of sorts as well, offering strange enticements, and in the competition between ship and woman, the outcome is uncertain right up till the end.

Shepard maps the gradual mental and physical disintegration of Wilander and his compatriots in small, incremental, but cumulatively deadly steps. Every nuance of the Kafkaesque conceit is explored in minute, palpable detail. And at the same time, the love affair between Wilander and Arlene exhibits a naturalistic heft. Shepard's worked this conceit of interpenetrating planes of reality often before—in fact, it constitutes one of his signature motifs—but here he proves that a good trope is inexhaustible.

Shepard's second novel of 2004, *A Handbook of American Prayer* (Thunder's Mouth Press, hardcover, \$22.00, pages, ISBN 1-56858-281-1), is an even more impressive performance, in an entirely different vein. A fervid, satirical, phantasmagorical romp across the American landscape and psyche, the book conjures up comparisons to the work of such keen dissectors of human foibles as Will Self, Scott Bradfield, and Gore Vidal.

The tale is narrated in the first person by one Wardlin Stuart. We encounter Wardlin as a disaffected, cynical, basically talentless young man. He commits a (partially and ambiguously) justifiable manslaughter and is sent to prison for ten years. There, he develops "prayerstyle," a kind of secular, godless religion, if such a thing is even possible, an appealing self-help method mixed with New Age platitudes. In prison he establishes a correspondence with a woman named Therese Madden. Therese's friendship and love lead to the fulfillment of one of Stuart's own prayers, and he is released from

prison. Now begins a roller-coaster journey through the American psycho-social circus, with Therese by his side. A publisher prints Stuart's musings in a volume that ironically bears the same title as the novel we're reading. The book goes on to become a bestseller. Stuart is anointed as a new Messiah for the twenty-first century. The only problem is that certain other Messiahs already in place—notably a preacher named Monroe Treat—are jealous. And the only help Stuart can rely on in the war of the preachers is a deity he might've conjured into being: the Lord of Loneliness.

Shepard exhibits enormous brio and savage delight in his evisceration of all that is delusional, cant-filled, greedy, and fearful in American culture. At the same time, he finds some wise things to say about what is actually holy. His depiction of Stuart's meteoric career is bigger than life, yet utterly consistent with a hundred such trajectories that we have seen blazed across the night skies before. Yet simultaneously, no one in this book is a cliché, a mere prop for Shepard's pronunciamientos. The smallest walk-on characters are individuated and real. As for Wardlin Stuart, his voice is as seductively hypnotic—even while full of self-doubt and confusion—as any previous voice Shepard or his peers cited above have ever conjured. And Shepard's masterful understanding of the way everyday people talk and think finds zesty release in the form of Darren, the drifter who just might be the Lord of Loneliness. Darren's mad riffs read like the captured dangerous zaniness of every uncanny biker-bar spieler who ever lived.

In this novel, Shepard both exalts and chastises the great and mingy American collective soul that has made us what we are today, and tells a hell of a story while doing so.

Finally on display is the protean, cosmopolitan short-story writer we all observed Shepard to be in such early collections as *The Jaguar Hunter* (1987). From PS Publishing comes a monumental collection titled *Trujillo* (hardcover, \$50.00, 682 pages, ISBN 1-902880-85-4). Ten stories previously published in various venues from 1999 to 2003 (including one from this very magazine), plus an eleventh piece original to this volume. All in all, a feast. By itself, this book would have made it a banner year for Shepard.

The first seven stories range the map of Shepard's characters, obsessions and baroque prose stylings. In "Only Partly Here," a man excavating the ruins of the World Trade Center encounters a disturbing woman in his off-hours. Soldiers in the Middle East stumble into a literal Islamic hell in "A Walk in the Garden." In Africa, an American investigates the bestial killers of "Crocodile Rock." The Russian nightclub named Eternity becomes an allegorical crucible for a gangster in "Eternity and Afterward." "Hands Up! Who Wants to Die?" is a kind of *Natural Born Killers* (1994) with an SF twist. "Jailwise" details a surreal prison. And "The Drive in Puerto Rico" recounts the redemption of a Latin American soldier.

The remaining four stories—"Señor Volto"; "The Same Old Story"; "The Park Sweeper"; and "Trujillo," a short novel—form a magical realist miniseries set in the town of Trujillo, Honduras, where sex and magic, demons and brujos befuddle the senses and wreak havoc and epiphanies in the lives of the protagonists.

With his Graham Greene anomie, his respect for the quotidian shackles and wings of our existence, and his fertile inventiveness, Shepard brews a heady blend of hallucinogenic narrative. Long may he guide us through various valleys of death.

## Spelunking

An unplanned publishing synchronicity allows us the luxury of getting reacquainted with a writer whose career began in 1929 and extended right up until his death in 2004. The author under discussion is Hugh Cave, born 1910, who until his death formed a triumvirate with Nelson Bond and Jack Williamson of pulp-era veterans surviving into the twenty-first century.

First, readers should probably take a look at *Cave of a Thousand Tales* (Arkham House, hardcover, \$33.95, 287 pages, ISBN 0-87054-183-8), the engaging and informal biography of Cave by Milt Thomas. Thomas's name is not one formerly found on any list of SF/F/H critical experts. Indeed, his non-fiction credits seem to lie mainly outside the genre. But Thomas supplements any initial unfamiliarity with the genre with a host of virtues. First, his close personal friendship with Cave allows for a wealth of first-hand knowledge-gathering. Second, he has plainly done his homework into the history of the zines where Cave published. Thirdly, Thomas is just a flat-out good writer, able to array the significant events and emotions of Cave's life into a narrative that reads almost like one of Cave's own spellbinders.

Like all those who emerged from the pulp crucible, Cave was forced to write enormous amounts of wordage at high speed in order to make a living. But he was always seeking to improve his work, and to venture out into new areas. Over the course of his career, Cave wrote several non-fiction volumes and a host of mainstream novels, besides the weird fantasies for which he is primarily known today. Many of the mainstream books stemmed from his time spent abroad in Haiti and

Jamaica. This variegated resumé of an adventurous soul makes for a more fascinating life story than that of most writers, whose hard-working butts seldom stray far from their office chairs.

Thomas exhibits intense empathy with his subject, but manages to remain objective. Detailing Cave's frustrated first marriage, Thomas does not cast Cave's wife as a complete villain, despite her many character defects, which, however, matched corresponding flaws in Cave's own personality. Likewise, Cave's absentee parenting comes in for some scrutiny.

Following a simple chronological scheme and leavening his reportage with copious extracts from interviews with Cave, Thomas also blends in plot synopses and contemporary critical responses to Cave's work. The result is a finely limned portrait of both the man and his accomplishments, offering plenty of pleasure and insight into a legendary career.

Cave's pulp stories moldered, un-reprinted and neglected, for years until Karl Wagner chose to assemble the best of them for his Carcosa Press in 1977, producing Cave's first story collection. Now, this highly collectible volume—fetching up to two hundred dollars from dealers—sees a reprint edition from Wildside Press: *Murgunstrumm and Others* (trade paper, \$24.95, 475 pages, ISBN 0-8095-0069-8). (The original Lee Brown Coye illos are reproduced as well. For more on Coye, see below.)

Over two dozen stories reveal Cave's solid craftsmanship and ability to conjur up eerie situations and emotion-packed plots, enacted by well-rounded characters. The tropes of pulp horror fiction loom large here: weird mansions, mad scientists, vampires, queer cults, psychotic killers. Cave was particularly fond of autonomous, evil-minded body

parts: severed or possessed arms that crawl and strangle make an appearance more than once. But even when he was utilizing similar motifs from story to story, Cave always put a new spin on them, like some master potter turning out dozens of vases, all of them familially linked, but each one different.

Stylistically, Cave at times sounded like everyone from Robert Bloch to H.P. Lovecraft to William Hope Hodgson. He was a master at grabbing the reader from the outset. Consider such opening lines as these from "The Watcher in the Green Room." "The plump, stumpy man in the double-breasted gray coat was quite obviously drunk. He walked with an exaggerated shuffle which carried him perilously close to the edge of the high curbing, whereupon he stopped short, drew his fat hands from their respective pockets, and gravely regarded the drooling gutter beneath him." As the story proceeds, our initial interest in the man's perpetual drunkenness is repaid by a hideous revelation. And the deft anthropomorphization of the insensate street is borne out by a latter blurring of dead and living matter. Or, Cave could hook you with just a single sentence, as in "Prey of the Nightborn." "Peter Marabeck's wife was buried on Tuesday, and he met the other woman the following Saturday night while driving home from Putney." Now, this other woman proves to be supernatural, but I maintain that this opener, with its psychological undertones, could have just as easily graced some *New Yorker*-style mimetic tale. Finally, Cave would experiment with strange viewpoints, such as the second-person, present-tense POV in "The Prophecy."

And that's the great thing about Cave's stories: you always get the feel of a fairly cosmopolitan, mature

mind at work. Even when he's faking, through dedicated research efforts, first-hand knowledge of some South Seas setting, his resonance with the way life might be lived in exotic places, his identification with a wide variety of characters, brings to his weird tales a solid foundation of closely imagined and rendered quotidian details. His harsh and empathetic version of the life lived by three Negro dump-dwellers in "Dead Man's Belt" is typical of his far-ranging sympathies.

This collection should serve as a cornerstone of any serious library of the supernatural, and Wildside deserves much praise for making it so generally available.

### Ocular Sweets

From July 3 to September 19, 2004, lucky visitors to the Grand Central Art Center at California State University at Fullerton could enjoy a resplendent exhibit titled "100 Artists See Satan." A panorama of individual interpretations of evil and the devil, this showcase featured eye-popping fantastical work from artists both famous and less well-known. Now those unfortunate enough not to catch this exhibit in person can revel in its infernal glories by picking up *100 Artists See Satan* (Grand Central Press/Last Gasp, trade paperback, \$24.95, unpaginated, ISBN 0-86719-666-1). Essentially the catalog of the show, this book comes with a fine essay by curator Mike McGee, detailing the fascinating history of the devil in art. What follows is a stunning array of works both representational and abstract, literal and symbolic. From the devil-girl temptresses of Robert Williams and Coop, to the arcane altar of Paul Laffoley, to the *Exorcist*-inspired photography of Ryan Mc-

Namara, we see just how strongly the concept of evil and its avatar has penetrated the consciousness of these artists and our culture. The range of visions provokes laughter, regret, shudders, and meditations. Truly a book to make one repent—or cast one's lot with the fallen angels. The team of graphic designers involved in this catalog deserves immense credit for the witty presentation of their material—for instance, the works of the artists are arrayed in reverse alphabetical order, *à la* some Black Mass—and their witty juxtaposition of supporting quotations. This might be the first time ever that Homer Simpson and Shakespeare shared a page.

Faithful readers of *Juxtapoz* magazine <[www.juxtapoz.com](http://www.juxtapoz.com)> will be long familiar with the concept of "lowbrow" art, that quasi-movement which yokes together a pop mindset with craftsmanlike skills, among a variety of independent-minded rebels. But those in need of an introduction to what might be the most vibrant art movement of the twenty-first century should look no further than *Pop Surrealism* (Ignition Publishing/Last Gasp, hardcover, \$39.95, unpaginated, ISBN 0-86719-818-1). Subtitled "The Rise of Underground Art" and lovingly assembled by Kristen Anderson, herself a gallery owner specializing in this type of painting, this volume features the work of nearly two dozen creators, reproduced on deluxe stock in scintillating hues and resolution. As Robert Williams informs us in his lead-in essay (two other writers, Larry Reid and Carlo McCormick, also offer keen insights), the themes and treatments of lowbrow art derive from "story illustration, comic book art, science fiction, movie poster art, motion picture production and effects, animation, music art and posters, psychedelic and punk rock art, hot rod and biker



art, surfer, beach bum and skateboard graphics, graffiti art, tattoo art, pin-up art, pornography and numerous other commonplace, egalitarian art forms." In short, just the material that floats my boat, and that of so many other like-minded folks (such as, perhaps, the readers of *Asimov's*). From the Cubist Tom-and-Jerry deconstructions of Anthony Ausgang to the bad girl declamations of Niagara to the Daliesque epiphanies of Todd Schorr, the artists herein prove that intellectual heft and playfulness are not mutually exclusive.

A companion volume to their *Science Fiction Poster Art* (2004), Tony Nourmand's and Graham Marsh's *Horror Poster Art* (Aurum Press, trade paperback, \$29.95, 192 pages, ISBN 1-84513-101-3) exhibits the same wide-ranging and exciting selection of alluring cinematic advertising and fascinating trivia as before. (Although, as with the earlier volume, some doubts pertain as to the hard facts presented: for instance, authorship of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is attributed to "Albert" Finney, rather than Jack.) In several instances, the compilers assemble multiple versions—both domestic and foreign—of artwork relating to the same film, providing us with educational lessons on how different minds and different cultures can profitably interpret the same product. The posters are often grouped into useful subsets: films derived from Poe's stories; films by Hitchcock, Lewton, Craven, et al; zombie films, etc. And the quality of the reproductions is magnificent. I confess to favoring the subtle glamour of the 1930's posters over the bluntness of some of the later work, but whatever era you're interested in, you'll find plenty of material here, much of it unfamiliar to even the aficionado.

This is both a handy reference work on the history of horrific cinema, and a primer to intelligent graphic design.

It seems impossible for any lover of fantastic imagery not to have encountered the work of Luis Royo. His high profile in the genre, attributable to his dozen books and other projects such as trading card series, should have brought him to everyone's attention by now. But if you are yet unacquainted with his work—or even if you have a book or three of his already—then the appearance of *Fantastic Art: The Best of Luis Royo* (NBM, hardcover, \$45.00, 240 pages, ISBN 1-56163-398-4) will be a godsend. This sumptuous showcase allows Royo's work to really shine. First off comes an introduction by Antonio Altarriba, who usefully highlights such perennial themes of Royo's as the "beauty and the beast" leitmotif. Altarriba continues to supply impressionistic text throughout the gallery of paintings that follow. Usefully divided into such sections as "The Monsters' Embrace" and "Fallen Angels," the subdivisions mostly feature a plethora of Royo's gorgeously haughty women. Often naked, fearfully be-weaponed, these beauties pose against a number of evocative settings. Although Royo favors Tolkienesque and Howardian vistas, he can also turn out vivid SF milieus, such as in the painting titled "Ties of Power," which features some of the most unique aliens yet depicted by anyone. Royo's winning ways with transparent fabrics, skin tones, and metallic surfaces insure that his visions possess a tangible heft. In an afterword, Royo says that he prefers to call his paintings "illuminations" rather than "illustrations," and the play of light in his canvases surely justifies such a conceit.

Recall, if you will, the glory days of



Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes* strip. Do you remember when Calvin would indulge in his "Spaceman Spiff" fantasies? Now imagine a strip in which everything Calvin fantasized about—all the oddball aliens and balky spaceships and paranoid interstellar adventures—*actually happens* to some little contemporary kid. If you can wrap your mind around that concept, then you've got a hold on the amiably quirky and utterly engaging *Astronauts of the Future* (NBM, trade paperback, \$14.95, unpaginated, ISBN 1-56163-407-7), co-created by Lewis Trondheim and Manu Larcenet. Gil and Martina are schoolchums who are convinced that they inhabit a solipsistic world reminiscent of Heinlein's "They." Sure enough, one day the illusions fall away, and the pair are revealed to be the only human inhabitants of an alien world. How they got there and what their purpose is forms a complicated, humorous tale. And that's even before their whole world comes under deadly attack by a race of pompous carnivores known as the Meskimeks. This tale's dialogue, pacing, and ingenuity are unsurpassed, and the art is charmingly loose-limbed, oddball, and affectionate. Together, the two men create an all-ages adventure that truly captivates. No heavy-handed whimsy or lectures here, just a wild and woolly coming-of-age story unlike any other.

In *The Fallen 2: Cold Religion* (NBM, trade paper, \$10.95, 48 pages, ISBN 1-56163-406-9) writer David Aaron Clark and artist David Rankin continue their descent into a hellish urban landscape where literal angels and devils battle for the souls of lost humans. Our two protagonists—art student Rena Mojica and tattooist John Savory—navigate a baffling landscape that includes S&M

clubs and hallucinatory celestial visions. Clark's dialogue and plotting call to mind the best of the *Hellblazer* storylines, while Rankin's stained-glass art summons up comparisons to that of Sue Coe, David Mack, and Dave McKean. The book ends with a cliffhanger that surely presages more excruciations to come.

The review of Hugh Cave's *Mur-gunstrumm* above simply mentions artist Lee Brown Coye without commenting on the superb quality of his work. That's because Coye deserves a book-length study all his own, which he happens to get in the shape of *Arts Unknown: The Life and Art of Lee Brown Coye* (Nonstop Press, hardcover, \$39.95, 176 pages, ISBN 1-933065-04-4), by Luis Ortiz. Readers with a sharp memory might recall Ortiz's name as editor and publisher of the fine small-press zine *Non-Stop*. But along with his flair for writing and organizing data, it is Ortiz's experience as a graphic designer that most comes into play here. Not only does Ortiz's artistic background allow him vast empathy with Coye, and extensive understanding of the art worlds in which Coye moved, but Ortiz's talents have likewise allowed him to design a smashingly beautiful book, heavy on graphic savvy. Nor is the text lacking in wonders. Ortiz sympathetically and intelligently charts Coye's life from birth (in the year 1907 in Syracuse, New York) to his death in 1981. The tale told is often a hard-luck one, with Coye's bountiful talents going unappreciated or under-utilized. Nonetheless, Ortiz stoutly defends the richness of Coye's inner and outer life. This is no sob story, but rather a depiction of how art for art's sake can flourish even despite the sometimes brutal demands of the marketplace. Coye was the prod-

uct of a small-town America that no longer exists, and Ortiz brilliantly sketches out this era, rendering the lineaments of Tully, New York, where Coye's sensibilities were formed, in tactile thickness. In fact, all along Coye's career we get excellent evocations of the milieus he inhabited, from Depression-era muralist to prozine-illustrator to small-press book jacket designer. Reading this fine biography is like riding a train through the history of three-quarters of the twentieth century, and seeing Coye's monsters through every window.

### Serious and Constructive

For thirty years now, the UK publisher Savoy Books, founded by David Britton and Michael Butterworth, has been boldly pursuing a policy of "transgressive" publishing, issuing books and music of outrageous fecundity and brio, much of it experimental, that invariably gets up the noses of the prudish. The firm's many accomplishments are at last chronicled in a book worthy of its subject: David M. Mitchell's *A Serious Life* (Savoy Books, hardcover, £20.00, 416 pages, ISBN 0-86130-114-5). But although this is a "in-house corporate history" to some extent, it's hardly a puff piece. Mitchell compassionately slaps the Savoy stuff he's not particularly fond of, while articulately praising the stuff he finds to be of lasting value. His segments of the text are the potent sinews that bind everything else together. Then come extensive interviews with the founders, full of engaging anecdotes and behind the scenes history, much of it wry and sardonic. Finally, there are reprinted essays and reviews from third-party experts. Savoy has always had a tight

connection with the SF world (as explained here, the enterprise arose out of the ashes of Moorcock's *New Worlds*), and has published work by Platt, Ellison, Ballard, and Delany, among others. This invaluable testament to the courage and vision and persistence of everyone involved reads like a secret history of the field. And of course, under the superb art direction of John Coulthart, this lavishly illustrated and intelligently designed book is pure eye candy as well.

The latest issue—Volume XI, Nos. 1 & 2—of A. Langley Searles's long-running *Fantasy Commentator* (trade paper, \$12.00, 173 pages, ISSN 1051-5011) is the special Fritz Leiber issue, assembled with the editorial assistance of Benjamin Szumskyj. It's a treasure trove of Leiber material, from secondary and primary sources both. Nearly every aspect of Leiber's long and varied career is examined, from his horror fiction to his fantasy to his science fiction. Thanks to the efforts of the perceptive critics herein, we see such sights as a young Leiber engaged in correspondence with Lovecraft, learning his trade. Later, a vivid selection of his letters to his lifelong fannish pal Franklin MacKnight reveal the mature Leiber facing artistic challenges while holding down a job at *Science Digest* magazine. Throughout the revelatory, generally insightful articles, no attempts are made to airbrush Leiber's complex personality. Both his vices and his virtues are given fair display. Careful dissections of such seminal works as the *Fafhrd* and the *Gray Mouser* series, *The Wanderer* (1964), and *Our Lady of Darkness* (1977) abound. For anyone who has ever enjoyed Leiber's sexy, solemn, scary, speculative tales, this issue is a must-have companion.

The world calls John Clute a critic

and reviewer. I call him a poet. A poet whose subject matter happens to be the literature of the fantastic, in all its multifarious splendors. His impassioned, impasto language, rich with metaphors and an oft-arcanic yet precisely apt vocabulary, transforms his reviews into odes and elegies, lyrics and sonnets. Reading his reviews is frequently an experience just as rich and ennobling as reading the novels under review. This is criticism as art, and nobody does it better. The proof of my assertion can be found in his latest collection: *Scores: Re Views 1993-2003* (Becon Publications, trade paperback, \$27.00, 428 pages, ISBN 1-870824-48-2). The majority of these pieces are reprinted from two venues: *Interzone* and *Science Fiction Weekly*. I detect a slight difference in flavor between the two families of articles. The newer reviews, from *SFW*, where Clute's regular column is called "Excessive Candour," benefit from the expansion into cyberspace and a larger, more general audience by becoming even more bold and wide-ranging than those written for *Interzone*, whose readership constituted something of a cocktail party of old friends. Which is not to denigrate these earlier excursions by any means. In both sets, Clute exhibits a bold, happy, eager willingness to wrestle with texts in the very arenas they stake out for themselves. Whether tackling *SF* or Fantasy, Horror or Slipstream, he applies a consistent toolbox of standards, but also selects just the right moral and aesthetic socket-wrenches for the job. He's funny, sobering, fair, impertinent, graceful, and brutal as the occasion demands. He conveys that reading *matters*. For this collection, he's not hesitated to revise and regroup and reconsider. For instance, sample this parenthetical

emendation to the review of Patrick O'Leary's *The Gift* (1997): "I have cut an entire paragraph here. I didn't understand a word of it." Likewise, bunching together formerly time-separated reviews of Gene Wolfe's and Peter Ackroyd's work leads to enhanced insights. Finally, if there's a critic who can synopsise the raw plot of a book more attractively and lucidly than Clute, I've yet to meet him or her. Covering almost two hundred titles, this volume is a map of both Clute's mind and the genre at large over a decade: fascinating topographies, both.

### Publisher Addresses

Arkham House, POB 546, Sauk City, WI 53583. Aurum Press, distributed by Trafalgar Square Publishing, POB 257, Howe Hill Road, North Pomfret, VT 05053. Becon Publications, distributed through Old Earth Books, POB 19951, Baltimore, MD 21211. Fantasy Commentator, 48 Highland Circle, Bronxville, NY 10708. Golden Gryphon Press, 3002 Perkins Road, Urbana, IL 61802. Grand Central Press, CSUF Grand Central Art Center, 125 North Broadway, Suite A, Santa Ana, CA 92701. Ignition Publishing, <[www.ignition-publishing.com](http://www.ignition-publishing.com)>. Last Gasp, 777 Florida Street, SF, CA 94110. NBM, 555 Eighth Avenue, Suite 1202, NY, NY 10018. Night Shade Books, 3623 SW Baird Street, Portland, OR 97219. Nonstop Press, POB 981, Peck Slip Station, NY, NY 10272. PS Publishing, 1 New Road, Hornsea, East Yorkshire, HU18 1PG, U.K. Savoy Books, 446 Wilmslow Road, Withington, Manchester M20 3BW, U.K. Thunder's Mouth Press, 245 West 17th Street, NY, NY 10011. Wildside Press, POB 301, Holicong, PA 18928. ○

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

**J**oin the Glasgow WorldCon and Seattle NASFiC at the door, if not a member yet. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## AUGUST 2005

4-8—**Interaction**. For info, write: Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. Or phone: Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre (SECC) (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) [interaction.worldcon.org.uk](http://interaction.worldcon.org.uk). (E-mail) [info@interaction.worldcon.org.uk](mailto:info@interaction.worldcon.org.uk). Con will be held in: Glasgow UK (if city omitted, same as in address) at the SECC. Guests will include: Robert Sheckley. £110+.

5-7—**Blindweed**. York, UK. A low-key relax-a-con alternative to the Glasgow WorldCon. £28.

12-14—**Official Star Trek Con**. (818) 409-0960. [creationent.com](http://creationent.com). Hilton (Star Trek: The Experience), Las Vegas NV.

11-15—**The Ring Goes Ever On**. [tolkensociety.org](http://tolkensociety.org). Aston Univ, Birmingham UK. 50 years of "Lord of the Rings."

12-15—**ConVersion**. [con-version.org](http://con-version.org). president@con-version.org. Calgary AB. George R.R. Martin.

18-21—**GenCon**, 120 Lakeside Ave. #100, Seattle WA 98122. (206) 957-3976. Indianapolis IN. Big nat'l. gaming con.

19-21—**ArmadilloCon**, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. (512) 477-6259. [armadillocontx@yahoo.com](mailto:armadillocontx@yahoo.com). Doubletree Hotel.

19-21—**DiversiCon**, Box 8036, Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 721-5959. [diversi-con.org](http://diversi-con.org). S.R. Thomas. Multicultural.

25-28—**Transnational Francophone Con**, c/o Bussy, 21 rue du Cimitière, Esneux 4130, Belgium. (+32) 4380 3388.

26-28—**BuboniCon**, Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176. (505) 266-8905. [bubonicon.com](http://bubonicon.com). McDevitt. S.R. Donaldson.

## SEPTEMBER 2005

1-4—**BoucherCon**, 507 S. 8th, Philadelphia PA 19147. (215) 923-0211. [shp@erols.com](mailto:shp@erols.com). Chicago IL. Mystery fiction.

1-5—**CascadiaCon**, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. [www.seattle2005.org](http://www.seattle2005.org). NASFiC, while WorldCon's in Glasgow. \$95+.

2-4—**Mephit FurMeet**, Box 190512, St. Louis MO 63119. [mephitfurmeet.org](http://mephitfurmeet.org). Holiday Inn Arpt., Memphis TN. Furies.

2-5—**DragonCon**, Box 16459, Atlanta GA 30321. (770) 909-0115. [dragoncon.org](http://dragoncon.org). Hyatt. Huge multigenre con.

3-4—**DreamWorker Xena Con**, Box 3250, Glastonbury BA6 9WL, UK. [kumara.org.uk](http://kumara.org.uk). Novotel, Ramada, Bristol UK.

9-11—**CopperCon**, Box 62613, Phoenix AZ 85062. (480) 945-6890. [coppercon.org](http://coppercon.org). Embassy Suites No. Sawyer, Keyes.

16-18—**MidWest ConStruction**, Box 1825, Lee's Summit MO 64063. [midfan.org](http://midfan.org). Con organizers meet to talk shop.

16-18—**Nan Desu Kan**, 1552 Monroe, Denver CO 80206. [genkidenki@hotmail.com](mailto:genkidenki@hotmail.com). Marriott Tech Center. Anime con.

16-18—**Roddenberry Universe**, 9 Rennison Ct., Glen Waverly VIC 3150, Australia. (+61) 3 9848 1068. Melbourne.

23-25—**Foolscap**, Box 2461, Seattle WA 98111. [chair@foolscapcon.org](http://chair@foolscapcon.org). Hilton, Bellevue WA. Harlan Ellison.

23-25—**Anime Weekend**, Box 13544, Atlanta GA 30324. (404) 364-9773. [awa-con.com](http://awa-con.com). Renaissance Waverly Hotel.

30-Oct. 2—**Archon**, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. [stlf.org](http://stlf.org). Holiday Inn, Collinsville IL. Nye, Bill Fawcett, Milan.

## OCTOBER 2005

7-9—**AlbaCon**, Box 2085, Albany NY 12220. [albacon.org](http://albacon.org). committee@albacon.org. Crowne Plaza. Guests TBA.

7-9—**ConText**, Box 163391, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 846-1051. [contextcon.com](http://contextcon.com). M. Swanwick, G. Van Gelder.

14-16—**CapClave**, 7113 Wayne Dr., Annandale VA 22003. [capclave.org](http://capclave.org). Hilton, Silver Spring MD (near DC). Waldrop.

## AUGUST 2006

23-27—**LACon IV**, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. [info@laconiv.com](mailto:info@laconiv.com). Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. WorldCon. \$150.

## AUGUST 2007

30-Sep. 3—**Nippon 2007**, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. [nippon2007.org](http://nippon2007.org). Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. \$160.

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# NEXT ISSUE

OCTOBER/  
NOVEMBER  
DOUBLE  
ISSUE

Next month is our huge October/November Double Issue, crammed to bursting with all of the fiction and non-fiction we could possibly get INTO it without it exploding messily all over the newsstands, including stuff from rising new stars and some of the biggest names in the business. Our cover story is from one of those rising new stars, as new writer **M. Bennardo** makes his *Asimov's* debut by showing us around a museum unlike any you've ever seen, and gives us an uncomfortably close encounter with the "Nightmare" that dwells there. But that's not even *close* to being all that's in store for you in this big Double Issue!

ALSO  
IN  
OCTOBER/  
NOVEMBER

Hugo and Nebula-winner **Geoffrey A. Landis** takes us among the hard-scrabble prospectors and miners of the outer solar system to show us why it may—or may not—be a good idea to spend your time "Betting on Eureka"; **L. Timmel Duchamp** takes us to The End of the World As We Know It, where nobody is feeling particularly fine, for some grueling "Memory Work"; John W. Campbell Award-winner **Jay Lake**, gives us a haunting—literally—glimpse of a world that exists all around our familiar everyday world, and of the dangers of being caught between them, in "Dark Flowers, Inverse Moon"; **Nisi Shawl** demonstrates that what goes around, *comes* around, in "Cruel Sistah"; new writer **Ted Kosmatka** makes a thought-provoking *Asimov's* debut by peering into the intricate workings of "The God Engine"; veteran author **Tom Purdom** visits a distant planet where high finance is inextricably entwined with intrigue, psychological manipulation, computer modeling, and military tactics, and a "Bank Run" turns out to be a very dangerous process indeed; **Phillip C. Jennings** takes us on a vivid otherworld adventure of another sort, one that doesn't require spaceships but *does* require monks, remote monasteries, enigmatic alien artifacts, and a sinister centuries-long conspiracy, as we head "Back to Moab"; popular new writer **Jack Skillingstead** returns with a tale of alien possession for a price, and the grim and unexpected results it can have, in "Overlay"; **Lois Tilton** takes us Sideways in Time for a fascinating look at what never happened—in *this* universe—as she relates the bloody saga of "Pericles the Tyrant"; and **Steve Martinez** returns to let some things "Out of the Box" that were probably better left within it.

EXCITING  
FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column muses about "Serials"; **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" column investigates "The New Weird"; and our Thought Experiment feature takes us on some wild and mind-bending "Adventures in Gnarly Computation," in company with writer and mathematician **Rudy Rucker**; plus poems and other features. Look for our immense October/November Double Issue on sale at your newsstand on September 5, 2005. Or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you this year (you can also subscribe to *Asimov's* online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com)).



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